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PLAY

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CONCORD: FIRST IMPRESSIONS

WHY SONY'S FPS IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK

→HANDS-ON

MARVEL RIVALS

Venom! Star Lord! Jeff... the shark?! How the superhero shooter could beat out Overwatch 2

→IT TAKES TWO

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Dual heroes in warring Japan – doubling up makes for the freshest AC in years!

→INTERVIEW

SHADOW GENERATIONS

Takashi Iizuka on the return of Sonic's edgier rival

FINAL FANTASY MEETS WWE: FFXIV'S BEST BOSS FIGHTS YET?

WHAT HAPPENED TO LEVEL DESTRUCTION?

WHY EA FC 25'S RUSH MODE IS AN ELECTRIC EVOLUTION

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SILENT HILL 2

REMAKING A CLASSIC

Hands-on: Pyramid Head, crafting terror, and the pressure on the devs to get it right

→BITSUMMIT BLOWOUT

JAPAN'S HUGE INDIE GAME FEST

The cutting-edge smaller releases you can't miss

→DOUBLE HIT INTERVIEW

MUSIC, VOICE, AND MIND OF A KILLER

Jesper Kyd and David Bateson on bringing Hitman to life

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Welcome

Silent Hill's fogginess is synonymous with PlayStation to me. From the blocky terror of the original on PS1 to the more sinister and complete designs of Silent Hill 2 on PS2 – these consoles can immerse us in our worst nightmares as much as delight us.

And I'm not alone. Silent Hill 2's mature story and truly psychological horror were for many the introduction to how deep games could go. So well-judged is it, that even revisiting it now – wrangling tanky controls – the trick still works. It's great.

Which is what makes the prospect of doing a full modern remake scary in a different way. How can a studio do it justice? We flew out to Japan to visit Konami and Bloober Team, take a look at the Silent Hill 2 remake (p48), and ask how they've done it. We can't wait to see more.

We also take a long look at Assassin's Creed Shadows (p56), which introduces some fresh twists to the historical series. Revisiting the concept of dual heroes seems to have paid off, with the sneaky Naoe boasting all-new abilities like being able to go prone (Solid Snake, who?).

Meanwhile, the battle to be the next big online shooter starts here. We go hands-on with Concord (p46) for a final preview before launch, and come away surprised and impressed by Sony's newest shooter. Marvel Rivals (p30), as a free-to-play superhero shooter, veers closer to Overwatch 2's territory, though in our play we find the mix of hero styles is still struggling to find its balance. Further on the horizon is Splitgate 2 (p16), which is set to springboard off the success of the first game into something longer lasting.

Our reviews this month see us delighted and disappointed in equal measure, though any month when we're surprised by new firm favourites is a win: we'll be talking about Kunitsu-Gami (p80), Monster Train (p82), and Thank Goodness You're Here! (p84) for some time. We hope you enjoy reading about it all inside, and stick around for next month's big issue post-Gamescom!

Oscar Taylor-Kent
EDITOR
play@futurenet.com
@MrOscarTK

GAME OF THE MONTH
Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail
BEST TOWN
Sapienza (Hitman)

STAY UPDATED
SIGN UP TO
OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S FOGGY FOUR

Luke Kemp
CONTRIBUTOR
So charmed by Hitman's David Bateson and Jesper Kyd he'd let them get away with murder.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Thank Goodness You're Here!
BEST TOWN
Inaba (Persona 4)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Glad she ended up in Tokyo to meet the SH2 devs instead of Silent Hill itself. But both's streets can be easy to get lost in.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Kunitsu-Gami
BEST TOWN
Baldur's Gate

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Marvel Rivals' hectic multiplayer won't draw Mim in. Try again when Morbius is added.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Thank Goodness You're Here!
BEST TOWN
Lego City

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Assassin's Creed Shadows finally gives Milf a Shogun outlet that doesn't involve spinning a kusarigama in the office.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Cygni: All Guns Blazing
BEST TOWN
Vice City (GTA)

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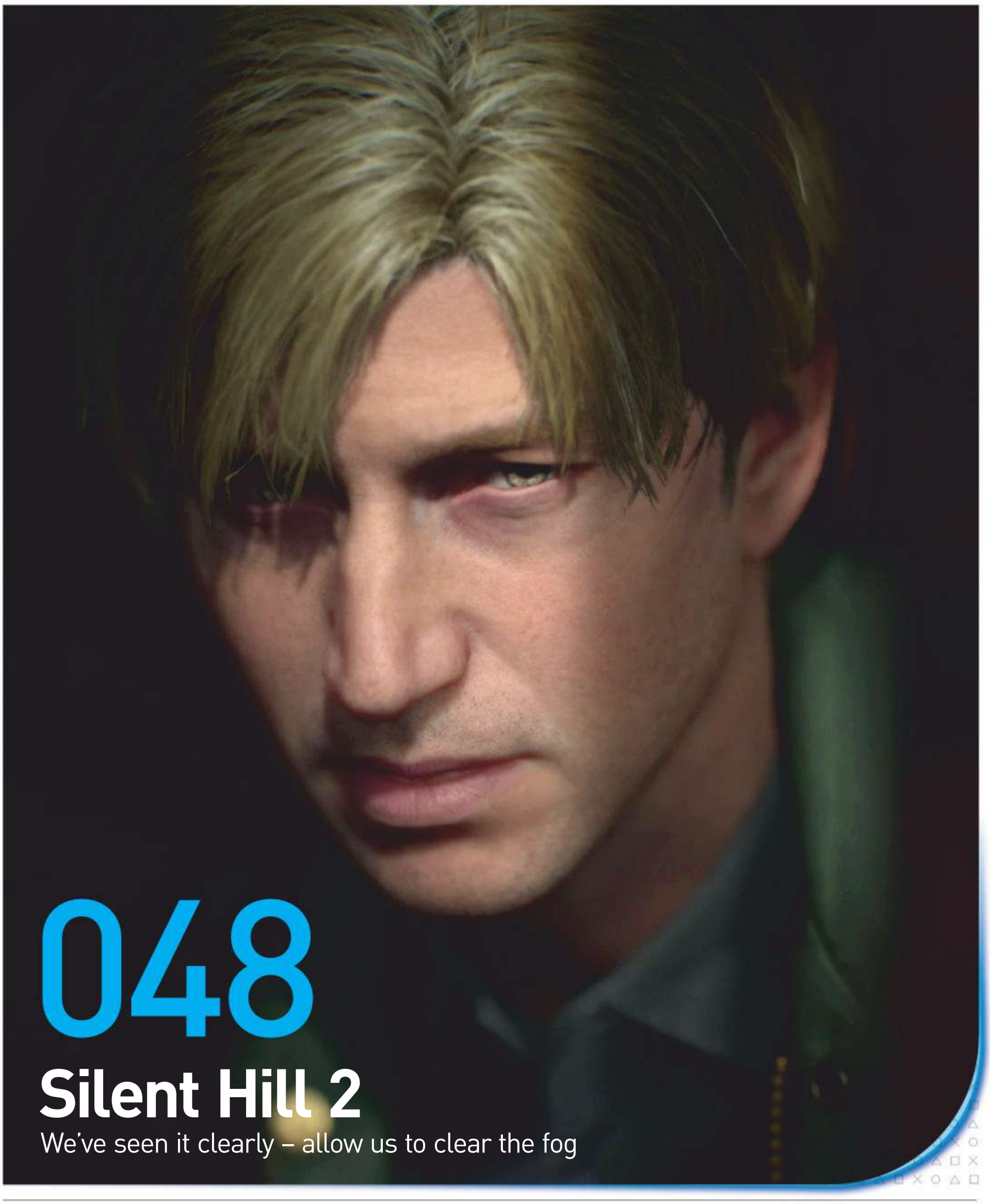

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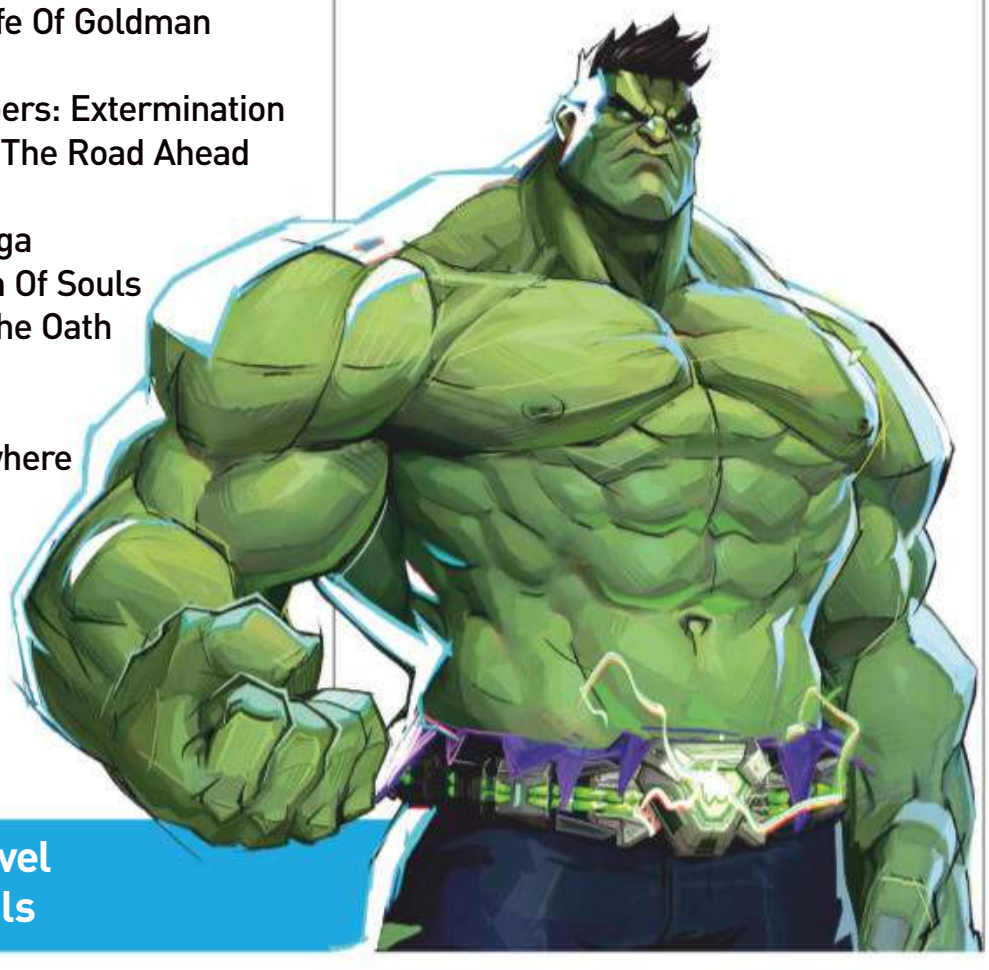

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Insider

Getting you closer to PlayStation's most exciting stories, people, and culture

Even Astro Bot couldn't resist a trip to Kyoto to see the future of Japanese indie gaming.

It was the first chance for players to get their hands on some highly-anticipated titles.

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Indie escapades in the heart of Japan

We visit Japan's largest indie gaming expo, Bitsummit, to see what the future has in store

Kyoto. A city known for its fusion of tradition and modernity, the old imperial capital of Japan is steeped in history and one of the most popular destinations for tourists visiting the country. It's also home to Bitsummit, which in its 12th year once again welcomed indie developers from across Japan and around the world to Miyako Messe to showcase their work and celebrate the future of indie gaming.

Held over three days, the show is a vital platform for indie games in a country where the sector, though growing in prominence and popularity following hits like Downwell and Omori, lags behind its international contemporaries in terms of homegrown success stories. Across the official selection and showcases from a full gamut of domestic and global publishers, doujin games, boardgames, and even a selection of titles utilising unique controllers (such as human whack-a-mole and shaking a cola-bottle-shaped jet engine), there's such breadth that it would be nearly impossible to take it all in over just a few days.

With so much to see, you can bet there were more than a few big hitters and even some pleasant surprises to uncover once we were finally unleashed on the show floor.

HORROR SHOW

Bitsummit was the first chance for players anywhere in the world to get their hands on some highly-anticipated upcoming titles. We simply had to check out Hotel Barcelona, a collaboration between Swery65 and Suda51. Swery himself spent much of the weekend manning his own booth to show off this side-scrolling roguelike action title parodying B-movie horror, making it unsurprisingly one of the most popular titles at the show as everyone sought out a chance to play the game and meet the man himself. You can bet we took our chance to say hi and play the game. We'll have a deeper dive into it in the future, but rest assured that the die-and-repeat roguelike formula is in safe hands, making for an interesting take on the progression system, and with plenty of bloody action to boot.

We simply had to check out Hotel Barcelona, a collaboration between Swery65 and Suda51.

The dream collaboration between Swery and Suda51 was a hot ticket on the Bitsummit show floor.

What's great about Bitsummit is the variety, developers with entirely different backgrounds and approaches setting up their stalls right next to each other. Near to Swery and Hotel Barcelona was something much slower-paced – InKonbini. Inspired by Shenmue (fans will notice the developer, Nagai Industries, is named after a business in that game), it portrays life working at a rural convenience store and supporting the

MASCOT WARS

Adding to the festive feeling, mascots galore were wandering the show floor, from the Lamb from Cult Of The Lamb (courtesy of Devolver Digital) to The Battle Cats to PlayStation's very own adorable Astro. Who doesn't love an oversized mascot, eh?

community that relies upon it. It was a great draw at the official PlayStation booth. Similarly, Pixeljunk developer Q-Games' latest fuzzy co-op puzzler All You Need Is Help was a big hit as show attendees co-operated and competed on various goals. It was easily possible to lose a day just on games like these and enjoying the ambience (and amazing food!) of the show.

LOCKING IN

But the fun of events like this comes from uncovering new things, finding relatively unknown experiences that surprise you enough to ensure you can't stop recalling them long after the show is over. Experimental titles designed for the show floor fitted the bill. One created more as a proof-of-concept than something aiming for a full commercial release saw us turning physical keys in locks to adjust the tracks of a train, while another had us running, kicking, and screaming to give energy to a paper aeroplane. You might not see these heading to consoles (PS Paper, anyone?), but they speak to the flourishing of creativity that comes from so many devs meeting to show off the fruits of their labour.

Goodbye Seoul wasn't on our radar before the show, but definitely is now we've seen it. A narrative adventure with rotoscoped animation similar to Flashback, it portrays a young girl journeying through a ravaged Seoul; the city has succumbed to riots and destruction after humanity learns it has only months left to live.

Cassette Boy, too, goes for something a little different, and deservedly won the show's grand prize. A Game-Boy-inspired RPG that has you twisting and turning its map to find passages and solve puzzles in a world where only what is visible is allowed to exist, it takes its retro inspirations and turns the idea on its head, at times literally – a worthy winner for Japanese developer Wonderland Kazakiri.

More than at any similar event, community is at the core of Bitsummit. Created by and for the Japanese indie scene and developers within it, creators were just as excited to share the work being displayed by their neighbouring booths as their own efforts. The small Japanese indie scene is tight-knit and ever-welcoming of new faces.

At the end of every night, everyone descended onto the banks of the Kyoto river, where language barriers, experience, and the relationship between developer, platform holder, and publisher would melt away with sake and laughter. Everyone was equal: we love games, and we're here to celebrate that. It was great to see official booths like the PlayStation one set up to champion these ideas. BitSummit is a celebration of the dedication to the trials, tribulations, miracles, and support from peers necessary in bringing any game to life. This is the very heart of gaming, beating in the heart of Kyoto.

*** Next year's event, Bitsummit XIII, will take place in Kyoto from 18-20 July 2025**

The fun of events like this comes from uncovering new things, finding experiences that surprise you.

Puzzle are in the eyes of the beholder, so spin the world to reveal more in Cassette Boy.

1

2

3

4

5

1 Goodbye Seoul is a beautifully animated, melancholy tale of an encroaching apocalypse. **2** It's great to go hands-on with games that haven't been released yet, like the punchy Forestrike, and to talk to the developers making them. **3** InKonbini is a slice-of-life game that has you work, well, *in* a konbini (basically a convenience store). **4** The award for cutest booth buddies had to go to Night At The Meowseum's feline friends. **5** All You Need Is Help is named after the feeling we usually have playing puzzlers – thankfully, as it's a co-op, that's exactly what you get, too!

NOT YET FOUND

Eleven other China Hero Project games are currently in production. They include Lost Soul Aside, first announced in 2017 and still currently without a release window – as FFXV/DMC fans, we're still waiting eagerly for this one.

PlayStation voices

The month in mouthing off

"HUMBLE GAMES HAS MADE THE DIFFICULT BUT NECESSARY DECISION TO RESTRUCTURE OUR OPERATIONS," SAYS THE COMPANY'S OFFICIAL STATEMENT, RESULTING IN AN ESTIMATED 36 LAYOFFS FOR THE AWARD-WINNING PUBLISHER OF SIGNALIS, STRAY GODS, AND MORE.

"WE QUICKLY ASKED OUR LOVELY BOTS TO ENGINEER THIS BEAUTY AND – TADA!" TEAM ASOBI STUDIO HEAD NICOLAS DOUCET REVEALS THE LIMITED-EDITION ASTRO BOT DUALSENSE. IT'S SO PRETTY!

HIDEO KOJIMA REMEMBERS, **"THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RELEASE OF 'POLICENAUTS'. [...] I WAS 30 YEARS OLD."** SO LONG AGO, AND STILL NO OFFICIAL ENGLISH-LANGUAGE RELEASE! PLEASE, SONY?

A hero returns

Sony's China Hero Project rises again, as three fresh games are announced

Centring on a bleak open world fighting a colourful curse, Unending Dawn looks undeniably slick.

Since it began in 2016, the China Hero Project has seen a selection of projects over the finish line, including cyberpunk action-adventure Anno: Mutationem and arcadey side-scroller FIST: Forged In Shadow Torch. The incubation initiative offers support to a limited selection of titles, and it's been such a successful venture that it's led to the establishment of the India Hero Project (which we covered in PLAY #39).

Now three more titles from China-based developers will enjoy a boost from Sony as part of the scheme's third phase. There's no release window in sight for any of these freshly announced titles, but all three are coming to PS5.

STAYING SHARP

First up is CangMo Game Entertainment's Project: Jinyiwei Dishing out considered swordplay à la Sekiro or Nioh, Project: Jinyiwei is a historical epic charting the rise of a warrior wrapped up in a conspiracy during the time of the Ming dynasty. Stiff camera movements and character animation throughout the announcement trailer betray what is otherwise a visually impressive game, boasting light-as-air movement replete with wallruns on top of heavy-hitting armed and unarmed martial arts fighting.

In a similarly soulslike vein is open world dark fantasy action RPG Unending Dawn from Parcae's Fate Studio. There's parrying and posture damage aplenty as a one-armed spearwoman and a secondary, sword-wielding protagonist in pigtails duel with fleshy horrors. In this bleak world colour can be a source of strength, and three factions vie for power: the Blue Of Eternity, the Red Of War, and the Gold Of Destiny. Bringing to mind Code Vein, all of that lore is wrapped up in an appealing anime-inspired art style.

Finally, there's ChillyRoom's mysterious project Loulan. It takes its name from an ancient kingdom, the ruins of which lie in modern-day Xinjiang. Though details are thin on the ground, we do know this single-player adventure stars a guard with a particular set of skills, including combat knowhow suited to chillier climes. Chilly by name, chilly by combat gameplay, we're hoping this one turns out to be pretty *cool*.

Puns aside, we're looking forward to excavating lore, crossing blades, and finding out more about each of these rising stars.

Learn about the project at: playstation.com/en-us/china-hero-project

The return of 2003's SVC Chaos wasn't on our bingo card.

Fighting for air

SVC Chaos, Cyberpunk's Lucy, Heihachi, and more hit back!

Last month's Evo 2024 fighting tournament in Las Vegas had us on the edge of our seats. SonicFox returned to take the Mortal Kombat 1 crown, Arslan Ash cemented his win streak as Tekken 7 was swapped for Tekken 8... we'll avoid spoiling too much; if you missed it, watch it online!

But beyond the one-on-ones, fighting game devs had plenty of announcements to make, painting a picture of the future of the genre. We'll start with the past resurfacing, though, as SNK Vs Capcom: SVC Chaos' remaster had a surprise release – it's out now!

Bandai Namco also showed where Tekken would be heading, revealing the return of the recently deceased Heihachi Mishima and the first-ever Tekken story expansion. Continuing right where The Dark Awakens left off, it'll explain Heihachi's revival and will be free for any Tekken 8 players to enjoy.

Guilty Gear Strive debuts a crossover character for the first time ever: Lucy from Cyberpunk: Edgerunners.

New characters abound across games. Street Fighter VI showcased Fatal Fury's Terry Bogard as a crossover fighter. Guilty Gear Strive, too, debuts a crossover character for the first time ever: Lucy from Cyberpunk: Edgerunners. The new season will also add Queen Dizzy and Venom as returning fighters, and newcomer Unika, who stars in the GGS: Dual Rulers anime.

Upcoming fighters 2XKO, Fatal Fury: City Of The Wolves, and Hunter X Hunter Nen X Impact got showcases, and seem to have captured player attention at the event. For new and ongoing fighters the future is strong – fists *will* fly.

Which fighters are you still playing? Let us know: play@futurenet.com

DEV ACCESS

Out of the Shadows

Takashi Iizuka discusses bringing the Ultimate Lifeform back in the limelight in **Shadow Generations**

While Takashi Iizuka is the head of Sonic Team, the Blue Blur's original creators left Sega long ago (though Sonic's designer, Naoto Ohshima, returned for last year's Sonic Superstars). Iizuka can, however, lay claim to being the creator of Shadow The Hedgehog, who made his debut in Sonic Adventure 2.

Dark, angsty Shadow's appearance in SA2 was intended to be a one-off, but he became such a favourite with fans that his original ending was retconned, and he's continued to pop up in subsequent games. However, aside from the bizarre self-titled spinoff on PS2 almost 20 years ago he hasn't been the centre of attention, so it's about time he got to hog the limelight once more. And he'll be doing just that in Shadow Generations, a new campaign that's being packaged with the remaster of 2011's Sonic Generations, called Sonic X Shadow Generations. The timing couldn't be more apt, as Iizuka reminds us that Shadow's making his big-screen debut this December in the third Sonic movie.

"We realised we should have a game that comes out around the time of the movie for people who are probably new to a lot of Sonic stuff, who may have seen the films but haven't played many games," he explains. "So [Sonic X Shadow Generations] will be the perfect game to introduce them to what the classic Sonic series is and what the modern Sonic gameplay is. By incorporating Shadow into that format, we also get introduced to who Shadow is, what his legacy moments are from a gameplay perspective, and in one entire package we can introduce all of our Sonic and Shadow characters to a brand-new movie audience."

> **[Generations] is really about high-speed platforming action, so guns aren't necessary.**

Fans had been asking for an updated version of Sonic Generations, especially following Sonic Colours Ultimate a few years ago, but Iizuka was conscious that simply remastering it would not have been enough, saying, "They'd just be like, 'Oh, this is just the old game again.'" There was just as much demand for a proper sequel to the game that many had felt like a return to form for Sonic. That's where Shadow Generations comes in: it's not just a bonus but a separate campaign, where the story happens "in parallel" to the Sonic Generations story where Time Eater appears and everyone is brought into the White Space. As such, it's a mode that can be played right from the beginning.

GENERATIONS GAME

But how can Shadow fit the Generations format, given his history isn't as lengthy as his blue rival's, and his story in SA2 only featured four levels? The answer is for the devs to be more liberal with the source material. "[Shadow Generations] will be going back and using the themes of the past areas that have really famous Shadow gameplay, and we're using those to build brand-new levels to play through," Iizuka explains. That will include classic Sonic-style side-scrolling stages, despite this being before Shadow's time.

While our hands-on demo was set in Space Colony Ark (based on Final Chase from SA2), it's yet to be confirmed which other past Shadow levels will be included. Still, we're pretty confident it will include stages from Shadow's self-titled spinoff, although Iizuka tells us the guns will be left back in the noughties.

"When Shadow The Hedgehog was created, the team really wanted to make a shooting action game as it was a really popular genre, and so they took Shadow and gave him a gun," he explains. "But this is a Generations format, which is really about high-speed platforming action, so guns aren't necessary." Instead, fans can look forward to new 'doom powers' – the first to be revealed makes Shadow look even more metal, with huge wings.

Black Doom will be present, though this story is also triggered by the arrival of Time Eater.

Perhaps the most intriguing addition is that Shadow will have his own White Space hub. In Sonic Generations this was essentially a playable menu select area, but with a twist. "We've made a huge open zone area where you can run around the 3D environment as a White Space," says Iizuka. It's the one element that feels like it's channelling the series' present more than the past, notably Sonic Frontiers, albeit not quite as open. "We didn't want to make this huge space where you're gonna get lost [...] It's been concentrated so that it's easier to get around, but it's the essence of Frontiers applied to the White Space."

Could that mean we'll be able to find Easter eggs, like unlocking the 2005 Shadow game in the same way as we could unlock Sonic 1 in the original Generations? We doubt it, but it's a Shadow of doubt you'll have to uncover for yourself.

*** Sonic X Shadow Generations is being released on 25 October for PS5 and PS4.**

1 Guns aren't returning, but that doesn't mean enemies won't use them. **2** For a character created as a one-off, Shadow's had a long life. **3** Shadow's White Space is basically a mini Frontiers hub.

Fans have already been making lots of noise about Shadow's new doom powers.

GEAR: STUFF WE LOVE

Yeah, we're figuring we're back

THE SHAPES COLLECTION – 6" DELUXE ALOY ACTION FIGURE

PLAYSTATION £48 GEAR.PLAYSTATION.COM

Horizon's Aloy leads the charge for PlayStation's new figure series, with accessories, five swappable faces, and six different hands. Non-deluxe options for Varl, Jin Sakai, Kratos, and Atreus come in at about £30 and are also six inches tall, they just don't have swappable options. Pre-orders ship out in Nov.

ISAAC CLARKE FIGMA

MAX FACTORY £65 APPROX GOODSMILEEUROPE.COM

While you might just miss the official pre-order slot for this new 17cm, highly articulated figure of the Dead Space star, he'll roll out in November across figure stores. With multiple hands, a RIG, and a plasma cutter (complete with optional blue flames) he's ready to cut off the limbs of any threats that invade your precious desk space.

ARMORED CORE VI – ORBITER NIGHTFALL MODEL KIT

BANDAI NAMCO £25 APPROX HOBBYLINKJAPAN.COM

You can't have awesome giant robots without the model kit fans getting eager to assemble models for themselves. The first wave from ACVI is now available to pre-order, including multiple Orbiter types, the tank-like Balam, and the wiry Schneider. Extra weapons are also up for grabs.

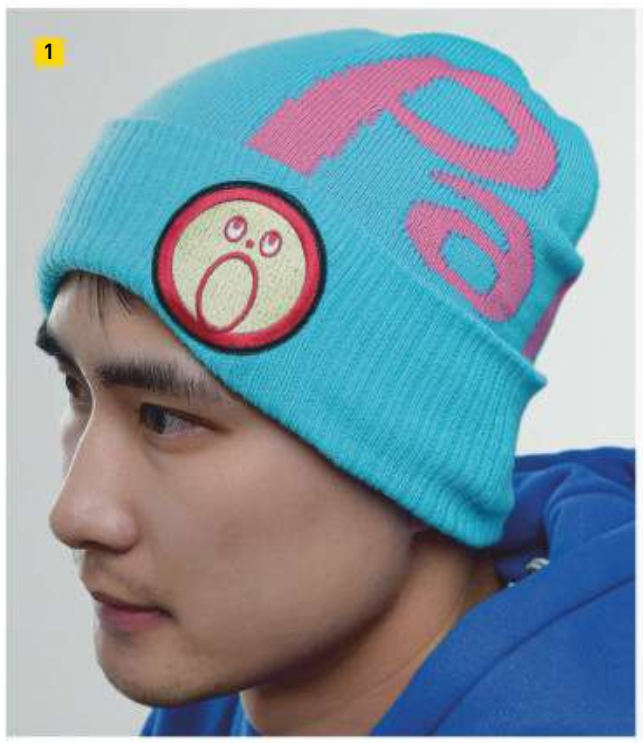
MAKISE KURISU NENDOROID 2.0

GOODSMILE £50 APPROX GOODSMILEEUROPE.COM

The memories we have of PS Vita will never truly go away, especially when merch keeps being released! Fan-favourite heroine Makise Kurisu from the visual novel Steins;Gate isn't only being reissued but refreshed. With multiple parts, including a Doc P bottle and, of course, a mobile phone (plus three faces) she's able to strike many poses.

PUT A PIN IN IT

Want to add some flair to a 'fit? There's an impressive number of pins on insertcoinclothing.com, including two new Fallout ones – repping the Brotherhood Of Steel and Nuka Cola.



The Ace Attorney 1 **Disbarred Wright beanie** (£22.99, insertcoinclothing.com) might be hard to pull off, if only because people might ask why you lost your licence to practise. However, few will be able to object to your fashion sense with this 2 **Objection hoodie** (£54.99, insertcoinclothing.com). What to do while looking so good? Complete the set by sipping from the 3 **Godot mug** (£9.99, insertcoinclothing.com). We won't tell on you if it's not 'blacker than a moonless night' coffee, or even if you fill it with hot choccy. Other nighttime proclivities? The 4 **Vampire Survivors Tesorissimo hoodie** (€84, fangamer.eu) may be a better fit. Clean up any mess you cause with the 5 **PowerWash Simulator tee** (€38, fangamer.eu) after, if you'd be so kind.

OSCAR WINNING DEAL

What a thrill... Laced's new and extra fancy Metal Gear Solid: The Vinyl Collection limited edition deluxe boxset features six colourful records, each gorgeously packaged. It'd be worth picking up as a collectible just for how beautiful it is, but the selection of music from across the entire series seals the deal. MGS3's 'Snake Eater', of course, features, as does MGS1's 'The Best Is Yet To Come', MSGV's 'Sins Of The Father', and more, making for 53 tracks in all. There's also an 18-track double vinyl version for a cheaper £36. You don't want to let this one sneak past you without raising the alarm – it's a mech-sized treat.

Pre-order the Metal Gear Solid: The Collection limited edition for £110 from lacedrecords.co – it's out in October.

THE BIG SHOT

Splitting the difference

Splitgate 2 prepares to step out of the portal

Whatever happened to Splitgate? The free-to-play portal-hopping FPS blew up in early access, where it flourished on PlayStation for about a year before its full release (we gave it 9/10 back in PLAY #6), at which point developer 1047 Games announced it was ending further work on the game in order to start anew, creating a sequel in Unreal Engine 5. Now, several years later, Splitgate 2 is finally emerging.

While the game engine may have changed, fast-paced, breezy, and satisfying shooting is still at the core. Yet where the first game was all about the play, Splitgate 2 is set apart by the amount of detail in its world and characters. It's still multiplayer-only, but 1047 Games is promising us "rich lore", in which Splitgate is a futuristic sport and its competitors have their own motivations for wanting to be the best at what they do. The game is set to be released in 2025, but you can pick up that lore now as an app providing free comics is already available.

Splitgate never lacked fans, but in creating a world that can grow over time, and adding elements that can hook players beyond just playing match after match, 1047 Games CEO Ian Proulx hopes to "build a game that can last a decade or more."

Numbers Game

We do the maths

£99.99

For Star Wars Outlaws' Gold Edition, which has extra content and three-day early access. Saps who pay £65 have to wait. (We won't stop complaining.)

736

Pages in Future Press' Bloodborne Complete Guide. Also including interviews and concept art, it combines the guide of the base game and DLC together in one volume.

10

Centimetres – approx. size of the fan favourite Solid Snake (MGS) and Raiden (MGS2) Nendoroid figures, which are being rereleased.

4,075

Days between the release of the last Deadpool game and this issue. If Wolverine can get a new one, why can't the merc with a mouth?

5,000,000

Brave Elden Lords-to-be purchased Elden Ring's nails-hard Shadow Of The Erdtree expansion...

37.80

...even though only this percentage of players beat the optional fight in the base game that guards the route to the DLC. We hope to see this climb!

DEBATE

What should jump into the fighting game arena next?

With Mortal Kombat welcoming Ghostface, Conan, and the T-1000, which fighters deserve their own games?

MILFORD COPPOCK
MANAGING ART EDITOR

"HOMELANDER HAS ALREADY APPEARED IN MK1, SO IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME."

Yes, I'd love to see NetherRealm produce a fully fledged fighter set in The Boys universe. It seems like a no-brainer, after all – super-powered pugilism with an unhealthy amount of ultraviolence is their speciallity, so it's not hard to imagine this *actually* happening. We could get the Homelander/Butcher beat-down we've always wanted, especially with Butcher's recently acquired abilities. Temp V pickups could also boost powers at the expense of some health. Just don't include the Termite. His fatalities could prove just too painful to watch. ■

MIRIAM MCDONALD
OPERATIONS EDITOR

"A FIGHTER NEEDS MULTIPLE COMBATANTS. WHO FITS THE BILL."

There's no question mark on my quote for a reason: I'm not asking you, I'm telling you. With Doctors one to 15 alone, Doctor Who provides a good pool of fighters, and then there are decades of companions and enemies. Ace with her dynamite versus a Krynoid? Mel Bush squealing a pack of Haemovores into submission? And how could you not want to give Adric a chance to avenge himself on the Cybermen? No Dalek fighters, though; they're running the arena. When my opponent's on the ropes, all I want to hear is the crowd screaming EXTERMINATE. ■

A fully fledged fighter set in The Boys universe seems like a no-brainer.

OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
EDITOR

"ACTION HERO FIGHTERS ARE GREAT, BUT I'M LOOKING FOR A DIFFERENT KIND OF ACTION."

I appreciate NetherRealm's love of classic action movies that form the basis for most of its crossover fighters, though the studio's movie picks aren't always my thing. The real king of action? Director Michael Mann. Games have attempted to adapt his filmography in the past, but never get the balance of action right – so why bother with the in-between moments? Imagine these ultimate attacks: Miami Vice Detective Rico's shotgun barrage, or Thief Frank's safe-melting thermal lance? But why stop there? Heat's Lieutenant Vincent Hanna and master thief Neil McCauley could fight over coffee with barbed words instead of bullets but, like Mortal Kombat's own crossovers, it needs to actually be Pacino and De Niro doing the fighting (though I don't care if it's only face scans on lower-res models – think PS2's heyday). Well, a guy can dream. ■

JESSICA KINGHORN
GAMES EDITOR

"THREE WORDS: SKELETONS, SKELETONS, SKELETONS."

Instead of '80s cinema, I'm thinking page turners, and Gideon The Ninth, the first book in the Locked Tomb series by Tamsyn Muir, would make a banging fighter. This one's got it all: swords, sapphics, and necromancy. There's even a vaguely tournament-shaped arc, as nine houses convene to answer the Emperor's call to find a candidate worthy to ascend to lyctorhood and... well, to be honest it doesn't really go well for anybody. So, picture this: tag team duels that play out in a flurry of blades and bones and special abilities, but also boast a unique sacrifice mechanic. If your partner is KO'd, the bout is far from over; for your surviving, now massively buffed necromancer, the battle is just beginning. ■

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IN THE MOOD FOR...

Pinball

You'll be in for a flipping good time, showing your wizardry with *most* of these

1 PINBALL FX – SYSTEM SHOCK TABLE
There are loads of excellent tables in Pinball FX, and the System Shock one captures the haunting isolation of Nightdive Studios' remake well. Enjoy Shodan's withering remarks as you fight mutants, smash security cameras, and relish a System Shock experience that *doesn't* involve backtracking.

2 WORMS PINBALL
Continuing PlayStation's charmingly bizarre habit of adding PS1 games no-one remembers to PS Plus, we have this pinball spinoff of the invertebrate-starring tactics game. It's set on a great table which nails the pinball learning curve of it being fun to gradually learn all its tricks and quirks. Victory!

3 MOMONGA PINBALL ADVENTURES
Charming, clever, and surprisingly challenging, this hybrid of puzzle platformer and primary-coloured pinball is a delight. Help a flying (well, rolling) squirrel save its friends from some evil owls in this brilliant hidden gem.

4 YOKU'S ISLAND EXPRESS
A game in which you play as a dung beetle sounds about as appealing as kissing one. But Yoku's mix of pinball and platforming will win you over, in a gentle metroidvania that, if never quite successful at making you get over the lack of jump button, is pleasant enough to make it worth a go.

5 DUKE NUKEM FOREVER
This legendarily mediocre FPS is full of gimmicks, presumably in the hope that if it keeps throwing things to do at you, something will distract you from the boring shooting. There's a trophy for getting a high enough score on the pinball table in the 'Duke Cave'. Please don't try to get it.

6 ANOTHER CRAB'S TREASURE
This soulslike takes place in an ocean full of all the rubbish we've dumped, and this boss battle on a discarded pinball table sees your poor crab bouncing around the arena. Someone mod Dark Souls so we can whack Ornstein and Smough with some flippers.

7 THE CREATURE IN THE WELL
Pinball and hack-and-slash action should go together like ice cream and wasps. Yet this interesting mashup makes a compelling case for sticking pinball mechanics where they don't belong. Fight your way through rooms designed like pinball tables, slashing electric spheres to power up devices and trying not to get smacked by electro-balls.

8 PINBALL HEROES
There was an Uncharted pinball table? Sure was! Unfortunately, it's in a fairly mediocre PSP title, complete with a hilariously bad picture of Nate looking like he needs to find a bathroom. Play tables themed around PlayStation classics like WipEout and, er, Fat Princess, in a game that's more quantity than quality.

9 DEMON'S TILT
Wish pinball was more blasphemous? Good news! Demon's Tilt is like if a heavy metal album cover came to life, a fascinating hybrid of Castlevania-style demon fighting and traditional pinball. It's delightfully OTT.

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Pinball M
A collection of horror-themed pinball tables from Zen Studios. It's fun to play, even though the name does make us giggle.

Star Wars Pinball VR
Well-liked Star Wars pinball that's sadly trapped on the original PSVR headset rather than available on the all-singing, all-dancing PSVR2.

Pinball – Our Church And Halloween RPG
So incredibly basic that we could probably run it in this magazine, if we didn't have quality standards.

Did we miss your favourite pinball game? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

1

2

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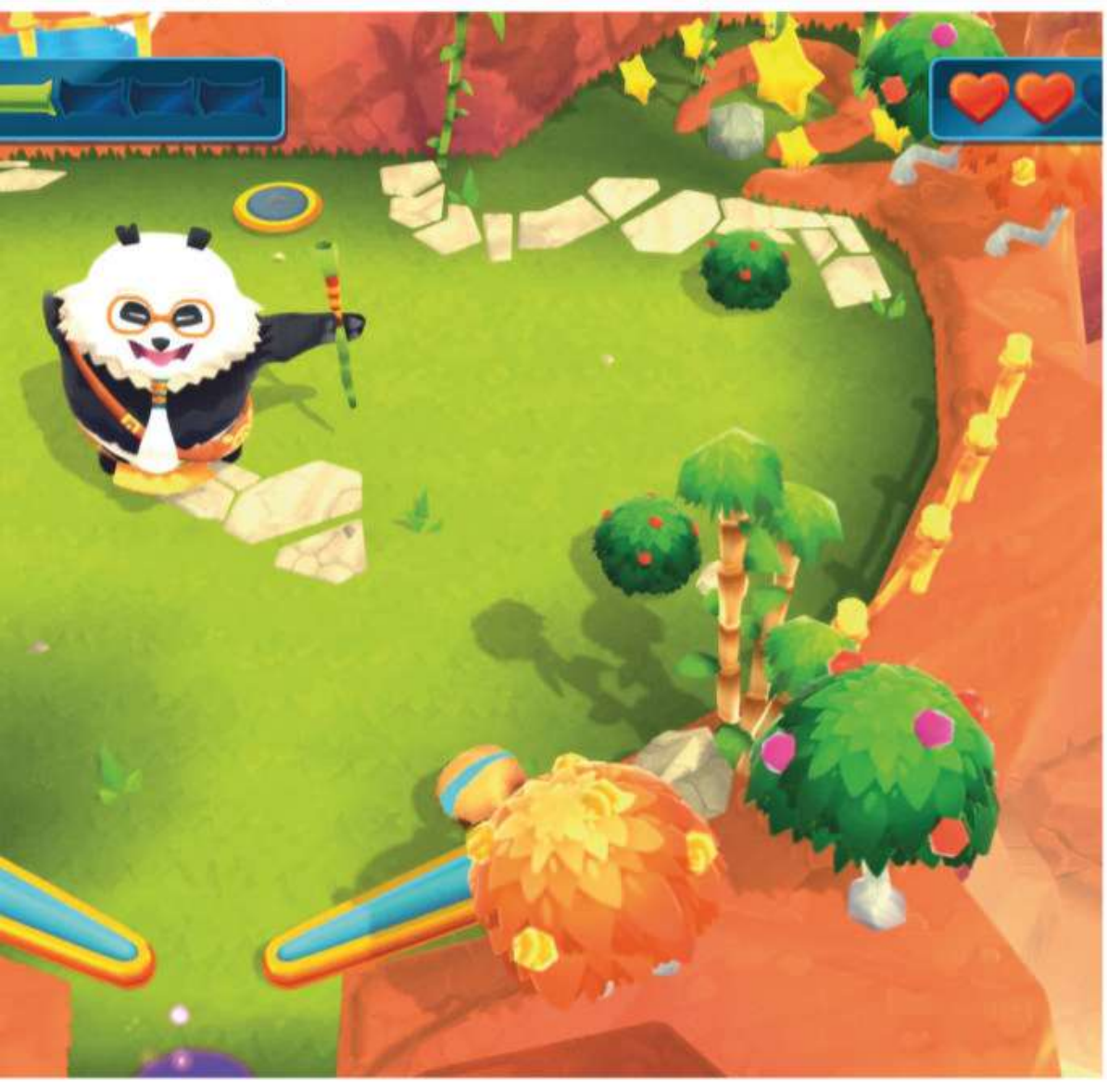
5

BALLS OF STEEL
00,000,000

6

7

"FIGHT THROUGH
ROOMS DESIGNED
LIKE PINBALL TABLES."



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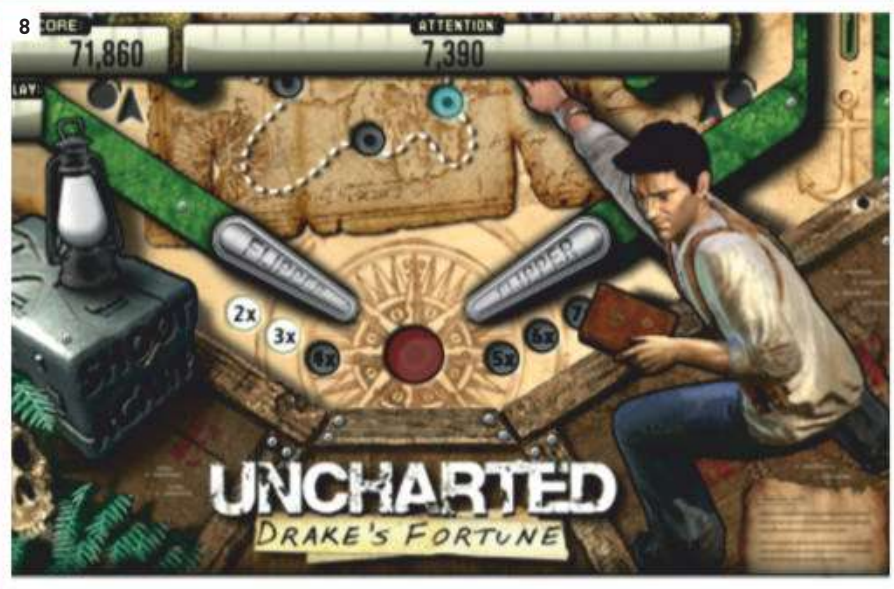
71,860
7,390
UNCHARTED
DRAKE'S FORTUNE

9

ZODIAC
ARCANE
HERMIT

OPINION

"WHERE DID THE PS3 ERA'S DESTRUCTIBLE ENVIRONMENTS GO?"

Did the push toward photorealistic graphics ruin the fun of ruination?

WRITER BIO
Issy van der Velde is a lifelong gamer who now writes about games full time, proving to his mum he didn't waste those hours in front of the TV.

PS3 felt like a console that could do anything. Finally, gaming was in HD, and some of the most fun I had was blowing things into beautiful smithereens. Red Faction: Guerrilla featured a world where every building was destructible, and Fracture had weapons that altered the terrain, letting me create ditches and hills for cover mid-firefight. It felt like the start of a trend, but that kind of game barely exists now.

A lot of PS5 games still have some level of destructible environment, but nothing on the scale of Red Faction, a single-player sandbox set on Mars. Being able to use rockets, remote charges, or a sledgehammer to topple an industrial chimney onto a convoy or blast the walls off a government office, sending the ceiling crashing down onto a squad of Earth Defense Force soldiers, is immensely satisfying, so why don't more single-player games let me do it?

I think the issue is the ever-increasing graphical fidelity we've come to expect from modern games. I still regularly replay PS4's hilariously named Re-Mars-tered version of Red Faction, and while it looks great, it's not trying for photorealism. Parts of buildings come off in big chunks and textures are often smooth, not detailed. It's helped ensure it hasn't aged too poorly and is most likely why it was able to contain such large-scale destruction on PS3. But now we live in an age of 4K textures and fully simulated particle effects; pupils dilate in low light and horse balls shrink in the cold. PS5 is powerful, but it can't give us the minutiae and the grand environmental change all at once.

Red Faction: Guerrilla captured lightning in a bottle. Destruction has never been so much fun.

BREAKING POINT

When I look back at Fracture, a game about a war between genetically modified and cybernetically enhanced humans, I don't think its terrain-altering effects would work in 4K on a technical level. The game has guns and grenades which can raise or lower parts of the ground at will. With fewer polygons to render on PS3, stretching the dirt in a way that looks satisfying and happens at the pace necessary to keep up with a gunfight is manageable. But if we want to see that hill rise and soil cascading down, or different layers of ground coming up and shifting, that's a lot more demanding graphically, and it may just not be worth the investment necessary to make it work.

Two games that carry the torch of destruction are Battlefield 2042 and The Finals. Both look stunning, but you can see some sacrifices had to be made for the sake of the ruination on display. Debris still comes away mostly in large chunks that then disintegrate on impact with another surface, but it gets the job done and shows that photorealism shouldn't be the goal with this kind of gameplay.

Still, I'm sad more single-player games haven't continued what I hoped would be a long-lasting trend. While I love dropping a building on someone in The Finals, nothing compares to the tension of setting up an ambush in Red Faction. I've often restarted a mission because a bridge didn't collapse in precisely the way I needed it to, something you can't do in a multiplayer match. Seeing out the perfect planned demolition is one of my ultimate player fantasies, and I hope more games return to the idea in the future.

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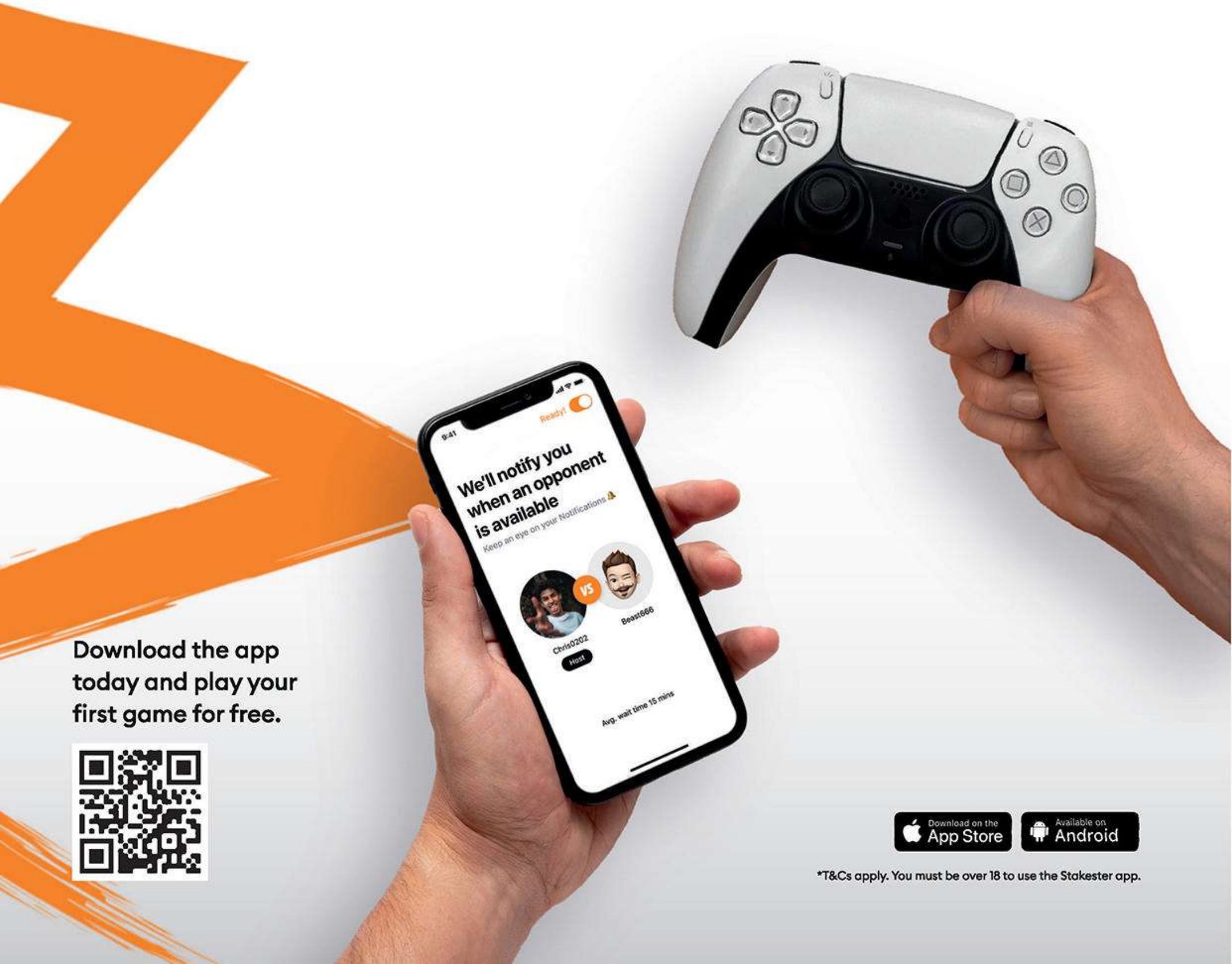

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> Modernity and tradition collide in both series' finales.

OPINION

"HERE'S WHAT DOOM: THE DARK AGES CAN LEARN FROM EVIL DEAD."

Evil Dead's final mediaeval hurrah could teach Id Software's latest a lot

WRITER BIO
Joseph Kime is an entertainment journalist. His favourite things include ripping, tearing, and long walks on the beach.

Wielding a shotgun, this character blasts legions of undead demons through two pulse-pounding instalments that ratchet up the gore and violence as they go, while their third outing dials back the clock and thrusts the hero into the past to go mediaeval on their infernal nemeses. Doom Slayer who? I mean Ash Williams! The latest Doom announcement is greatly appreciated, but it's interesting how it parallels the Evil Dead trilogy that ended with Army Of Darkness. It also gives Doom: The Dark Ages the chance to learn from the past.

In any case, switching a modern arsenal and futuristic blasting for flying beasts, burning castles, and badass fur coats is still a bold choice (and one that builds neatly on the lore added in Doom Eternal). So it was for The Evil Dead too. Sam Raimi's horror movie trilogy is like no other – the first in the series is scrappy, with much to prove, adopting silliness as a means of balancing its immense dedication to gore. Then comes the critically-acclaimed sequel, which is basically the same film again with more focus and an emphasis on fun. Finally, the third film surprises fans by sending protagonist Ash Williams back to the middle ages, now awash with evil monsters. Army Of Darkness is in some ways a bizarre entry, then, and it sticks out like a sore thumb when seen from afar, but The Dark Ages might manage to feel like a more elegant extension to Doom.

It's too bad no Evil Dead game to date has managed to replicate Doom's frenetic energy.

GROOVY DUO

Modernity and tradition collide in both series' finales, with each protagonist using their trusted boomstick to dole out justice to the horrors that await. Whether it's a minigun that spits shards of skulls or arrows infused with basement gunpowder, both reflect a merging of the familiar and the archaic, and the need to take matters into your own hands the only way you know how. It seems that the Doom Slayer's giant ridable dragon, aided with the powers of the crucible, is his version of Ash's Oldsmobile, tricked out for its era and headed straight for the home of pure evil.

The key thing that The Dark Ages needs to learn from Army Of Darkness, though, is not to stray too far over the line. Fans have criticised the final Evil Dead film for stepping too far into absurd humour that threatens to undermine its horror foundation – and while one-liners are probably off the table for the Doom Slayer, there is still a chance that by steering too far into giving players chaos, Id will forget to include that very, very small amount of restraint that leads to player satisfaction. Stomping clean through imp heads is fun because you're *not* doing it non-stop, just as watching skeletons quake as they explode works because you've never seen it before. Which isn't to say Doom: The Dark Ages has to play it straight – the famous FPS series has always had a dark streak of humour – but it needs to stay true to its roots while doing so, even with the change of setting.

But there's safety in the familiarity of The Dark Ages, and whether the enemy is demon or Deadite, in the future or past, fans will no doubt be taking the opportunity to satiate their lust for chaos. Good, bad – either way you're the guy with the gun.

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REPLIES

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#43 Astro Bot led our roundup of the 50 hottest games in development.

MEDALLING KIDS

Call me old if you must, but I really miss the days of multi-sports sims. The Olympics has really made me long for the days when you'd get shooting, swimming, running, the whole lot, in a single game.
Kev Anderson

While the younger members of Team PLAY agree with you – yes, it would have been nice to enact our own version of the Olympics after the event ended – Milf and Mim keep shaking their heads and muttering something about Daley Thompson killing joysticks. And frankly, DualSenses are too pricy to go waggling to destruction. So our dream of using *all* the buttons and triggers to pull off incredible combos as we pretend to be Simone Biles will have to remain just that.

RPGZZZZZZZZ

RPG this, RPG that. Not everyone wants to go ham on a dragon, you know. And can you stop banging on about romance in games? In fact, how about you stop ramming RPGs down our throats?
Matt Evans

How about if you romance the dragon, eh? Actually, we think we saw a fan fic about that once. *Ahem* Moving on, we promise if developers stop making great RPGs, we'll stop talking about them. But if they're good, we're still going to be all over them… like a romanceable dragon

TV GO HOME

Do you think games being turned into TV shows will be bad for the games in the long run?
Vix Green

Given the number of shoddy action scenes we've seen in movies that seem to have been taken from, or designed to fit into, videogames, we'd say it's the other way round. As long as the makers of each understand their medium and audience, they'll do a good job.

"I LONG FOR THE DAYS WHEN YOU'D GET RUNNING, SHOOTING, THE WHOLE LOT, IN A SINGLE GAME."

STAR LETTER TECH FANTASY

This weekend I finally finished FFVII Rebirth – I have my life back! And ultimately it was a mixed bag for me. When the remakes were announced I was so envious of all the new gamers that would get to play such a classic but with today's technology. But after Rebirth I still think new gamers have missed out. When I played the original everything about it was new to me. RPG, open world, turn-based, minigames, optional characters, fleshed-out characters – it was all groundbreaking. The new games? So many borrowed ideas. Each area another clichéd checklist of stuff. While the story and characters will always be great, as a gameplay experience it often fell flat. Proof that technology alone aren't enough to improve a game.
Pete Wisdom

We're never going to complain about getting more Final Fantasy, and love the extra detail the new games are able to put into VII's story – but we admit, it's getting ever harder for developers to innovate. What's more, many nowadays seem to play things safe when it comes to exploring the potential of technology. We'd ask for a VR Final Fantasy, but then we'd never see Jess and Oscar again.

CAN I GET A RT?

The most pleasing tweetings from our timeline…

@CadeRageous
Astro is the bestest cutie of all PlayStation characters.

@benbulbeck
Lovely cover Play magazine. Astro Bot deservedly getting the limelight. I predict this will be a BRILLIANT PS5 game.

@Des_Subari
But thats okay because I've settled on a new goal, I'm gonna pester @PLAYgamingmag until I get a job and I'm gonna BECOME the gaming magazine. The Dan Ryckert Game Informer method

@stevemhawesome
Pirates article and no mention of Sky Pirate Balthier? Hold your heads in shame

TROLL OF THE MONTH

@steve3334454
Clickbait and ragebait journalism lol
[*Print publications; all about the clicks* – ed]

@BatchGaming
The Arkham Asylum game was amazing back in the day and making me itch for a revisit. I hope one day it'll be on Plus Classics.

@motombo87
Astro and Horizon Lego both look like winners to me.

"SUCKS! I SHOOT PLAYERS WITH A FULL CLIP AND THEY DON'T DIE, I GET SHOT ONCE I DIE! MAKES NO SENSE! DON'T LIKE AT ALL."
ALESSANDRO GINEZ NATI ISN'T INTO XDEFIANT

"I'M ENJOYING IT. JUST NEED THEM TO FIX THE SERVER ISSUES."
BRANDON GONZALES LIKES IT

READERS' MOST WANTED

Which games are bleeping loudest on your radar?

01

Astro Bot

The little robot's game goes on sale while this issue's in shops. Why not buy both?
FORMAT PS5
ETA 6 SEP

02

Silent Hill 2

Ready to return to that foggy old town?
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

03

Warhammer 40,000: Space Marine II

Those dastardly tyranids won't know what hit 'em...
FORMAT PS5
ETA 2024

VOTE NOW!

Tell us the five games you can't wait to play at play@futurenet.com

04

Ratatan

A surprise fourth place for this kickstarted successor to rhythm adventure Patapon.
FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA APR 2025

05

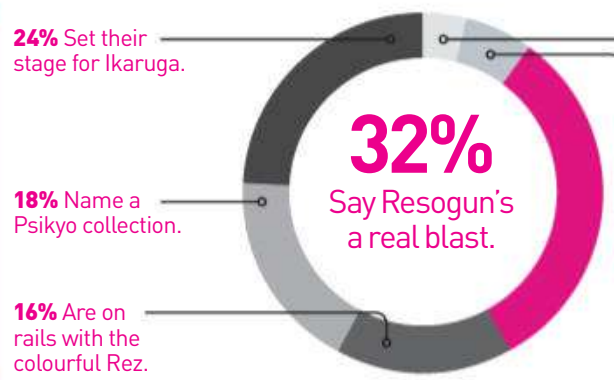
Dragon Age: The Veilguard

EA, can you give us a quantum of Solas?
FORMAT PS5
ETA Late 2024

EXIT POLL

Our Facebook fans answer a final question

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE SHMUP?



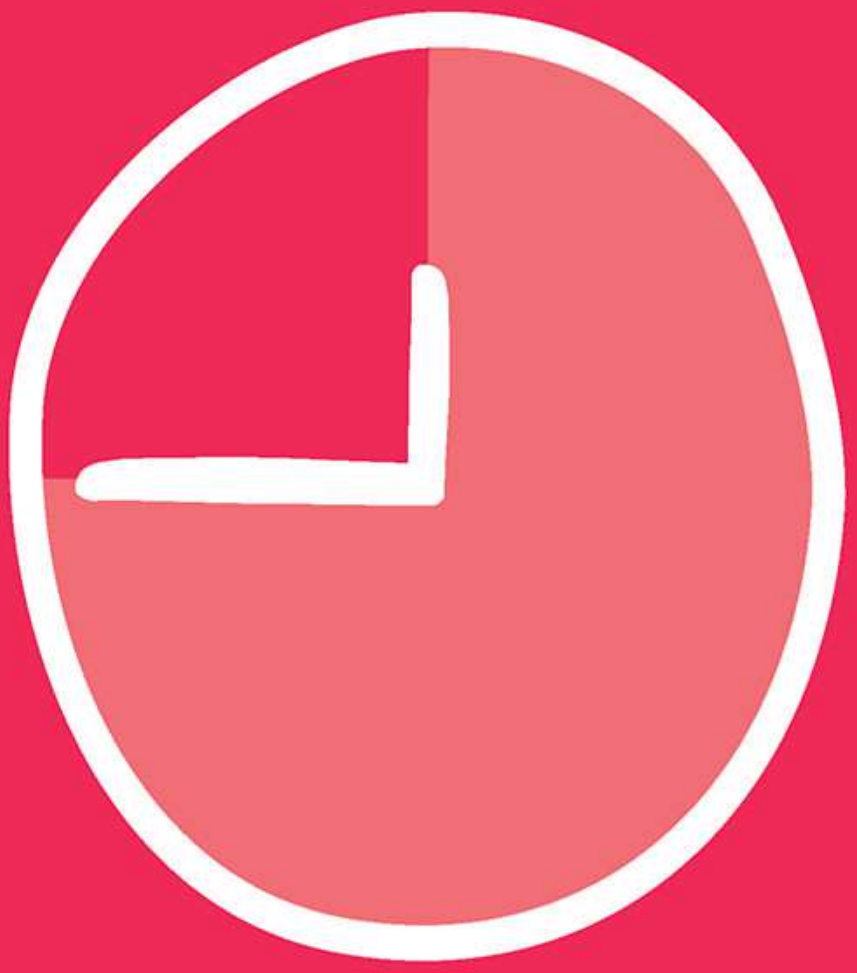
24% Set their stage for Ikaruga.
18% Name a Psikyo collection.
16% Are on rails with the colourful Rez.
6% Go back to PS2 for Psyvariar.
4% Say another PS2 title – Silpheed: The Lost Planet.

NEXT MONTH

Who's the best protagonist in a Star Wars game?

THE BRAIN TUMOUR CHARITY

A CURE CAN'T WAIT



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Previews

"AN URBAN FANTASY TAKE ON JAPAN."
037 Reynatis

030 Marvel Rivals

Not merely a hero shooter, but a superhero shooter

HIGHLIGHTS

EA SPORTS FC 25 034 | TOKYO PSYCHODEMIC 036 | THE ETERNAL LIFE OF GOLDMAN 038 | WILDERMYTH 040 STARSHIP TROOPERS: EXTERMINATION 042 | A QUIET PLACE: THE ROAD AHEAD 044 | PROJECT TIDES 045 | SIGMA STAR SAGA 045 | BLEACH REBIRTH OF SOULS 045 | YS MEMOIRE: THE OATH IN FELGHANA 045 | WINGSPAN 045

Given we know these heroes, it should be easy to dive straight into the action with five chums.

"SOLID GUNPLAY HELPS US SQUEEZE SOME FUN OUT OF THESE FACE-OFFS."

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** NETEASE GAMES, SHATTERSHOCK LIMITED
DEV NETEASE GAMES, MARVEL GAMES / **PLAYERS** 12

Marvel Rivals

Finally, we get to shoot that stupid raccoon

'Overwatch… but with Marvel superheroes!' A few years ago, that pitch would have sounded like a licence to print money. Now, after Marvel's Avengers flopped, and Marvel's Guardians Of The Galaxy flopped, and Marvel's Midnight Suns flopped, it increasingly seems like players aren't interested in a non-Spider-Man Marvel game. Marvel Rivals finds itself in the bizarre position of being almost an underdog.

An underdog with access to the entire Marvel universe IP and a massive budget, mind. No expense seems to have been spared on this lavish production, with its beautiful cel-shaded graphics, luscious animated cutscenes, and – best of all – a huge roster of playable heroes and villains. A Marvel game where you can play as Magneto, Venom, Thor, Hulk, *and* a shark called Jeff is off to an excellent start.

It's a 6v6 hero shooter that has you completing some baffling objective delivered in a blink-and-you'll-miss-it exposition dump (developers, stop putting crucial info on loading screens on a console with basically no load times). Usually you're defending/obstructing a moving vehicle or some territory, à la Overwatch, though there's a Conquest mode if you prefer a straight deathmatch.

Solid gunplay helps us squeeze some fun out of these face-offs. The Punisher has a machine gun that can be switched out for a shotgun and both have decent kick, with lovely vibration on the DualSense. But what kind of bore picks *The Punisher* when there are so many legendary comic-book characters on offer? Well, therein lies Marvel Rivals' fatal flaw – not enough of these characters are fun to play as.

SUPER ZEROES

It's been approximately four millennia since we last played a decent X-Men game, so before our hands-on we could hardly wait to soar through the skies as Storm and Magneto. But Magneto's main attack is a pathetic purple projectile that has all the weight and impact of a paper aeroplane. His actual role is that of defender, capable of casting shields that protect both himself and your teammates. Projectiles fired at his shields accumulate in a metal circle behind his back, building up into a powerful death-disc that can then be fired. It's an interesting idea, but like too many of the non-gun weapons lacks the weight or impact or any of the crucial feedback that makes shooters satisfying to play. Besides, who thought taking Magneto, a supervillain of incredible power, and putting him on shield duty was a good idea? It's one of many times Marvel Rivals feels like it's muzzled what makes a character fun in order to force them into a hero shooter template.

Storm fares a little better, in that her attacks feel more tangible, and she has an excellent ultimate ability where

FACTRICK

1. TIMEY WHY-ME?

Doctor Doom fighting Doctor Doom from 2099 is the reason heroes from different times are battling. Er, OK!

2. JUMP THE SHARK

Halfway through the beta, Thor and Jeff The Land Shark were added to the roster. Er, thanks?

3. NO-RRATOR

Galacta, daughter of planet-scoffing Galactus, is the game's narrator. She's, er, an acquired taste.

TRACK RECORD NetEase is one of the biggest gaming companies in the world, and has released two Marvel games for mobile before. Like those, Rivals is free-to-play, but is looking to make a bigger splash on consoles.

1

» she turns into a furious cyclone of death that's just as much fun to execute as it sounds. We get into a sneaky habit of playing as a more enjoyable hero, then switching to her when our ultimate is filled up. Mantis is our preferred healer character, but even healing is hamstrung by the lack of satisfying feedback. Star-Lord is a highlight, and not just because this version isn't played by Chris Pratt. His rocket boots make traversal great fun in a shooter where many of the cast feel like they're strolling through molasses, and his quickfire shooting is a treat too. Namor is a really pleasant surprise, lobbing tridents that pack a wallop and little octopi that act as remote turrets. We certainly enjoy the company of this king of the seas more than that of Jeff The Land Shark. The first time you submerge yourself so only your fin is visible and Jeff hums some Jaws-style music is cute. It's less cute when it happens *every frikkin time*.

In fact, could they get a million monkeys with a million typewriters to write some more quips? The few on offer here are really hit and miss and repeat within a few matches, making for a grating consta-soundtrack that's usually bitterly ironic because of how fast fights are. Too often you'll hear the equivalent of 'The comeback starts now!' in the same second that said hero takes a fatal trident to the face.

OVER BOTCHED?

While all the characters look the part, the maps are disappointing. Famous Marvel locations like Asgard and, er, some streets are bland, often confusing to navigate, and aren't properly demolishable. Perhaps we've been spoiled by the everything-can-be-smashed nature of The Finals but these 'destructible' maps feel like they can be merely gently grazed in comparison. They're emblematic of a game oozing with potential and fun ideas, but lacking focus and consistent execution at present. Throwing ever more characters into the mix is not going to save this one from mediocrity, especially when so many heroes are currently duds. Still, with some balance tweaks and improved action, there may be a Hulk lurking inside this Bruce Banner yet.

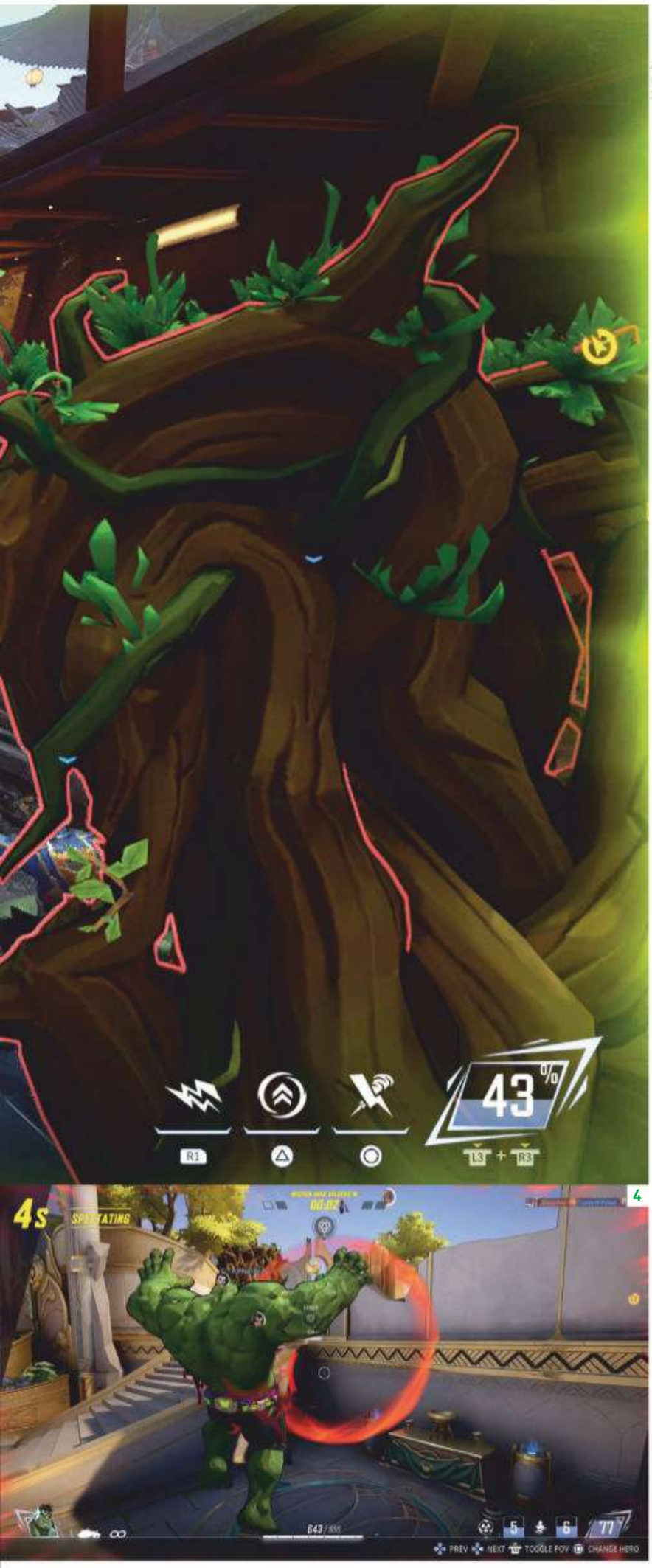
IMPRESSIONS

Launching a hero shooter with 22 playable characters is braver than trying to fight Thanos with nothing but a toothpick. But this feels far too messy and incoherent in its current form.

2

3

1 Possession of this Spider-bot is key to victory. 2 Groot and Jeff The Land Shark team up for massive damage. Fun, unless you're on the wrong side of it. 3 Magneto fires poxy purple lasers at robots. How the mighty have fallen... 4 Hulk smash! Why haven't we had a proper Hulk game in years, eh?



It does explosions well. Here we are on the wrong side of Storm's Ultimate.

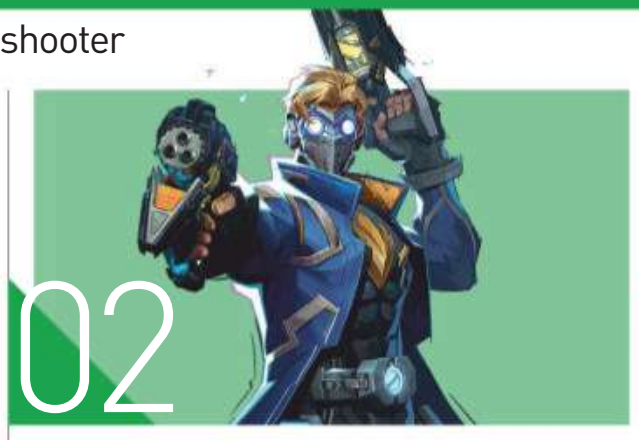
"A GAME OOZING WITH POTENTIAL AND FUN IDEAS, BUT LACKING FOCUS AT PRESENT."

Truly heroic

Some of the better heroes in this PvP shooter

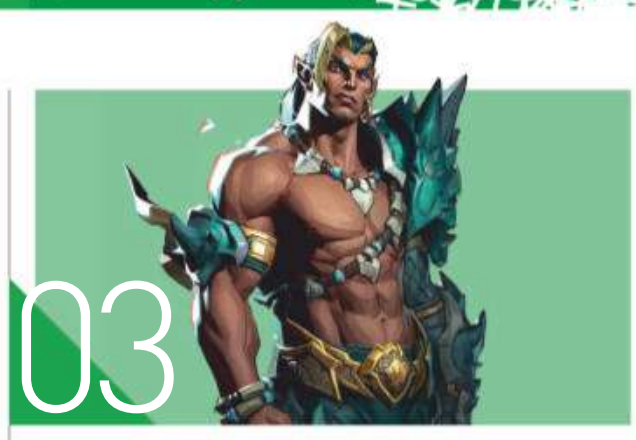
01

Not as much fun as he was in last year's Marvel's Spider-Man 2, Venom is still a wonderfully horrible, liquidy, too-many-toothed blast to play as.



02

Star-Lord's great shooting and traversal work just as well here as they did in the GOTG game that nobody bought because life is cruel and unfair.



03

Marvel's Aquaman-like is a joy to play as, even if we have to cough and look away when anyone asks what Namor's from. [*The Illuminati is... displeased* – ed]

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 27 SEP / **PUB** EA / **DEV** EA CANADA / **PLAYERS** 1-22

EA Sports FC 25

The former FIFA series unleashes a five-a-side frenzy

Everyone knows the theory surrounding an artist's difficult second album. What about a studio's challenging sophomore sim? After killing off the FIFA series last summer, EA Vancouver successfully revitalised its football offering with slower match speed, individual PlayStyles, and the addition of female players to Ultimate Team. You're therefore justified in the wondering where it goes next.

The short answer is: five-a-side. We've played FC 25, and our first port of call is its new Rush mode, which replaces the FIFA-Street-aping Volta. Rather than being set in walled patches on clay or concrete, Rush games utilise a smaller version of a conventional pitch. There are throws-in, corners, and it feels like a proper end-to-end FC contest in miniature – only with a few fun, futuristic innovations.

Positions are extinct: you select a keeper and your best four players. There's no opening kick off. Instead, the ball flies in from the bottom of the screen and you race to control it. Bad fouls produce blue cards, which mean a one-minute trip to the sin bin. Plus this new addition is used promisingly across all modes. Ultimate Team provides a lobby where you can immediately team up with three mates while deploying your favourite card. In career mode, Rush matches are used to sample youth prospects – and winning tournaments bolsters their stats. Neat.

11-a-side matchplay isn't quite so transformative, although that's to be expected in year two. Shooting feels near-identical. Fresh animations make dribbling tighter, while passing error is increased when you ping the ball off at unnatural angles. Still, critics are going to complain. EA gonna EA, and so on. What may sate them is the new level of tactical depth which comes from those FC 24 PlayStyles being enhanced by Player Roles.

There are more than 30 of these, and they legitimately affect how teammates function off the ball. New tactics menus enable you to see which Roles your players can use, and what movements they trigger, such as a right-back with 'falseback' drifting into central midfield, Trent Alexander-Arnold style. They're theoretically so advanced that traditional options such as Defensive and Ultra Attacking have been axed. Instead, advanced setups can be easily downloaded or uploaded, then actioned mid-match with a D-pad press.

> "ONCE THE SEASON GETS UNDERWAY, YOU'LL BE ABLE TO JUMP IN AT ANY STAGE."

Such nuances feel more in tune with the heyday of Pro Evolution Soccer than FIFA, and don't stop there. FC 25 also introduces a simulation gameplay option. It's not part of our hands-on, but a behind-closed-doors look reveals it has promise. Matches are slowed down again, and privy to authentic weather effects, with players occasionally slipping over on muddy pitches, and the ball trajectory of crosses affected by the wind. Simulation is offline only, so FUT obsessives needn't worry about their goal bonanzas being borked.

CAREER YEAR

One FC 25 element is getting a serious overhaul – and again, it's longstanding fans who'll be most encouraged. Female players made it into Ultimate Team last year, and now they're integrated into career mode, to the tune of five leagues and the women's Champions League. You can switch from managing a men's side to a women's one, and vice versa. Legends are included, too. Wondering how David Beckham would fare at modern Manchester United, or a rival club like Liverpool? Now you can find out.

Best of all are Live Start Points. Once the season gets underway, you'll be able to jump in at any stage with the correct real-life tables, top scorer lists, transfers, injuries, and so on. And it'll be backdated. Let's say Villa are top in October, then fall away, but you only get the game at Christmas. You'll be able to backtrack to their highest point, and try to sustain that form. Maybe, just maybe, you might even be able to finally win Harry Kane a trophy. Which will most likely mean having to live-start a Bayern Munich save long before April…

IMPRESSIONS

It's FC 24 with greater tactical acumen and some five-on-five freshness. That's no bad thing – last year's re-debut was strong – but some are likely to find fault with a lack of profound change.

FACTRICK

1. TINKER TIME

Player Roles mean you've got up to 400 million team tactical options to play with, according to EA.

2. PACK SHUFFLING

In FUT you can now trigger more than one Evolution at once, and tailor cards with sound effects and more.

3. DOUBLE DUTCH

Up to 100 duplicates can be stashed in a specific FUT folder, then accessed in order to complete SBCs.

TRACK RECORD The studio which found fame as EA Canada has been making FIFA and FC games since 1993 – longer than some PLAY readers have been playing. It opened in 1983 as Distinctive Software, working on titles like the original Fight Night.

1

4

4 Player likenesses look spot-on, while EA is using AI to convert real-life photos into in-game faces for smaller sides. 5 The LWB, RWB, and CF positions have been cut – instead Roles define whether a player overlaps or makes late runs. 6 New corner assignments include front-post, back-post, and a specific target. Yes!

2

3

1 Volta is gone, completely. The new Rush mode is now your only option if you want to play five-a-side. 2 Five new skill moves include the Big Feint and Toe Drag Stepover. 3 In addition to being David Beckham, you can try a player career as Thierry Henry, Kelly Smith, Andrea Pirlo, or Zinedine Zidane.

5

6

FMV sequences take the form of newscasts, CCTV footage, and more to build a world of fear.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** GRAVITY / **DEV** GRAVITY GAME ARISE / **PLAYERS** 1

Tokyo Psychodemic

A post-pandemic world gone mad?

The year is 2019, and a new infectious disease is first detected in Tokyo. It's thought to be flu but soon discovered to incur a fatality rate of over 40%. A gruelling three-year lockdown follows, and just as the world returns to normal, paranormal serial murders and incidents occur city-wide.

Tokyo Psychodemic is grim, with a premise which might come too close to home for some, but if you're able to withstand its deadly serious tone and approach to murder and bodily mutilation, you're in for a fascinatingly realistic investigative mystery when the game finally escapes its Japan-only quarantine.

"INVESTIGATE VARIOUS INTERCONNECTED INCIDENTS."

UNCOVER EVERYTHING

Working for a detective agency, you investigate various interconnected apparently-paranormal incidents, along with your manager Tomono Akiba (and occasional help from former police officer Yuika Lawrence Kijima and myriad users of the dark web). This is one of the most accurate depictions you'll see in a game of being a detective on a real case. If Ace Attorney has you point-and-clicking for clues before cross-examining a parrot, Tokyo Psychodemic sees you flicking through a virtual PC to examine case files, crime scene photos, autopsy reports, and more, all while reading news clippings, speaking to people, and putting together an evidence board to point yourself towards the truth.

The realism is only heightened by the game's unique blend of 2D visual-novel-like narrative sequences and character designs with FMV-style live-action CCTV footage, news reports, and other video to build out this concept of a Tokyo in turmoil, traumatised by a pandemic and a series of killings. The story flirts with the unreal as you explore paranormal activities, cults, and spontaneous human combustion, but be warned: it's as sombre as a wake, and you'll have to be dedicated to the nitty-gritty to uncover the truth.

No matter how dark or (shockingly) gruesome it gets.

IMPRESSIONS

This mature blend of Her Story and Ace Attorney is stomach-churning, but you'll be desperate to reveal the truth.

Building an evidence board makes you feel like a true detective. Or a conspiracy theorist.

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02 months

METAPHOR REFANTAZIO

The Persona creators shake up their RPG formula with a mix of real-time and turn-based scraps.

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 11 OCT / **PUB** SEGA

04 months

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

Development's been rebooted, but could it still really launch this year?

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2024
PUB PARADOX INTERACTIVE

06 months

PHANTOM BREAKER: BATTLE GROUNDS ULTIMATE

A chibi brawler! 'nuff said.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 13 FEB / **PUB** ROCKET PANDA GAMES

Flinging spells as up to three different characters leads to combos that have to be seen to be believed.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 27 SEP / **PUB** NIS AMERICA / **DEV** FURYU CORPORATION / **PLAYERS** 1

Reynatis

Licence to spell

Magical teens tearing up Tokyo – you may be thinking 'Well, I've heard that before,' but hear us out. For a start, do you ever wonder what the scenario writer of Final Fantasy VII, Kazushige Nojima, is up to these days, apart from also bringing Final Fantasy VII Rebirth's story to life? The short answer is *this*.

Speaking of legendary talent, Nojima is joined by composer Yoko Shimomura, whose work you'll have heard in many Square Enix RPGs including Kingdom Hearts and Parasite Eve, as well as Capcom fighters such as Street Fighter II.

URBAN BRAWL

Reynatis is in the same vein as Neo: The World Ends With You – it's a similarly story-heavy RPG, with action-forward combat mechanics. It even features that 2021 game's psychic teen cast and bad-vibes enemies as part of an official crossover. Whereas those young'uns were fighting for their hearts' desire in a parallel Tokyo, Reynatis' setting is an urban fantasy take on modern Japan where wizards are persecuted for their powers. Magicians are monitored by the authorities, and most non-magical civilians are advised not to venture out into Shibuya at night… though few heed this warning.

"AN URBAN FANTASY TAKE ON JAPAN WHERE WIZARDS ARE PERSECUTED."

You play as a party of three magically-inclined characters. In battle, in addition to being able to swap between party members mid-combo, you have a choice of two combat modes. Suppressed mode seals your powers but allows you to dodge all incoming damage with the press of a button. Liberated mode, on the other hand, is all killer, no filler, seeing you unleash blistering barrages but unable to defend yourself. Each offers exploration perks too: exploring Tokyo in Suppressed mode conceals your identity, allowing you to chat with the locals, whereas Liberated mode allows you to use your powers to move breezily through town, though any locals who see you whizzing past might just report you to the magical arm of the law.

IMPRESSIONS

Veteran talent and a choice of combat modes has us intrigued. Will this action RPG cast its spell on us?

1 Marin Kirizumi is a wizard who fights to be free; Sari Nishijima is a magic-user who thinks the oppression of wizards is justice. 2 Your powers can help or hinder exploration.

Still images almost don't do this one justice. Trust us when we say that watching that three-faced fiend finally crumble away is a sight to behold.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** THQ NORDIC
DEV WEAPPY STUDIO / **PLAYERS** 1

The Eternal Life Of Goldman

Not dead yet

With age comes experience, and the protagonist of this lovingly hand-crafted 2D platformer is testament to that fact. The older gentleman in question proudly wears his kippah, and also wields a cane whose humble appearance belies the fleet-footedness it affords him. Arriving on a tropical island that's revealed to be far from paradise, this elder quickly resolves to kill the ancient god wreaking havoc upon its shores. Well, *someone's* got to be the responsible adult in this situation.

As we merrily pogo-jump through the firestorm that devours the island in the opening level, our minds boggle at the heaps of hand-drawn frames bringing every background, every creature, every flourish of the cane to life. Years of work went into forging this animated adventure, crafting a 2D tale that draws inspiration from Jewish, Greek, and Mesopotamian mythology. The narrative pulls at decidedly existential thematic threads – after all, it's hard not to wonder 'What am I doing?' as everything burns around you.

FACTRICK

1. MAKING MAGIC

This otherwise hand-drawn, animated adventure is being built in Unity.

2. UNIQUE BEAST

Weappy also recently announced film studio strategy title Hollywood Animal, but only for PC.

3. ON THE MAP

Weappy Studio was previously based in Minsk, Belarus, but now calls Cyprus home.

THROUGH THE FIRE AND FLAMES

But how does it play? All right, it's time to talk about mobility aids: not only is your cane essential for getting around, it's also fully upgradeable, with plenty of parts to find that can expand your range of movement. For instance, an upgraded handle allows the grey-haired hero to grasp and hang from various hand-holds, while swapping the cane's shaft for one made from an impressively flexible alloy gives his jumps a little extra boost. Not only that, now your cane can send fighty foes packing with a pleasingly animated pogo-bop on the head.

It's no slouch against bosses either, as we see in a bullfighting bout against a horned horror. Rather than whacking the beastie repeatedly, you've got to be clever or risk being bowled over when it next charges at you. Some strange power is animating this cloth creature, with a little sapped away every time we yank at its pull-string handle with our cane. By luring the hard-headed hellion and picking our moments to jump out of harm's way, it isn't long before we're able to toss aside the magician's curtain. That's what you get for underestimating your elders.

IMPRESSIONS

Goldman's blend of slick platforming and 2D animation has thoroughly charmed us, as has the intriguing mythological mashup. We reckon this old dog may well teach *us* some new tricks.

TRACK RECORD Weappy Studio was founded in 2015, and is best known for its story-forward strategy series This Is The Police. This includes two mainline games (which both came to PS4) plus the turn-based tactical spin-off Rebel Cops.

"THIS ELDER QUICKLY RESOLVES TO KILL THE ANCIENT GOD WHO'S WREAKING HAVOC."

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 22 OCT / **PUB** AUROCH DIGITAL
DEV WORLDWALKER GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

Wildermyth

Telling tales

Looking for fantasy that's a real page-turner? How does a quest spent battling against mechanically augmented zombies sound? Or what about a Big Bad who's actually an insectoid drake who can rootle around your thoughts? Already a beloved tome on other platforms, this procedurally-generated RPG attempts to put story first.

For many tabletop adventurers, the thing that keeps them coming back is the story the party tells together. Wildermyth borrows heavily from this format, generating heroes with personalities that lead them to butt heads or even fall in love, and unique histories that'll twist the knife when the time comes to make tough story choices.

None of these characteristics are static, either, with each party member affected in different ways by the journey they take together. For instance, whether you trust or attack a wandering wolf god it'll make for a hairy situation either way – but how will the encounter affect your party? Could this experience be *transformative*? Hey, you won't find any spoilers here – this is a legend you've got to carve yourself.

IMPRESSIONS

There are no dice to roll here, but we're still eager to see how the chips fall to allow us to create our own legend. It's an adventurer's life for us!

1 Turn-based combat in a gorgeous papercraft world. 2 Heroes and their relationships grow over time on the road. 3 Characters age over the course of a campaign, and with age comes experience. 4 New for this release is the Monster Compendium. 5 Go out in a blaze of glory?

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Putting some distance between yourself and the bugs can be a good idea.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 11 OCT / **PUB** KNIGHTS PEAK / **DEV** OFFWORLD INDUSTRIES / **PLAYERS** 1-16

Starship Troopers: Extermination

Service guarantees citizenship, but does it guarantee a good time?

Considering some of us at PLAY hadn't been born when Starship Troopers came out in 1997, it's incredible to think this satire on the military-industrial complex, which was something of a box-office flop, has had this much staying power. Although, on the other hand, that probably speaks to how incisive its cultural critique was that it is still as (if not more) relevant today.

FACTRICK

1. CASPER CAN-DO!

Star of the first (and third) Starship Troopers movie, Casper Van Dien is reprising his role as Johnny Rico here.

2. BUG TESTING

The game has been in early access since May last year, and soon PS5 players will be able to join the fight.

3. RICO'S ROUGHNECKS

The game can support up to 16 players online – and you'll need all the help you can get fighting those bugs.

Starship Troopers' recent resurgence owes as much to the success of contemporaries like Helldivers 2 as it does to a young generation drawn to its satire of a world stage in increasing turmoil. Which means a new licensed game capitalising on the series' dispassionate militarism makes sense. We can lose ourselves in the horror of killing bugs together. Though if war is hell, how do you make a game like Extermination fun to play?

BUGGING OUT

Humour, it seems. While shooting is satisfying (thanks to really chunky sound design for these futuristic firearms) and base-building with your overly patriotic pals is fun, Extermination is a chaotic nightmare, but it's able to elicit a chuckle – just like the movie. A big part of this slapstick horror is down to the Carnage physics system that Offworld Industries has been working on. This system means that as you and the Roughnecks mow down hundreds of bugs, their bodies litter the battlefield and can tumble around.

In our time with the game, it results in nightmarish set-pieces. At one point, our team is trapped inside a bunker and the exit is *clogged up* with bugs, forcing us to use grenades to blast them into kibble to get out. At another, our base is overrun not because our defences have been destroyed but because those alien scumbags climb over their comrades' dead bodies until they can just clamber over our walls (à la World War Z).

We've yet to see if Extermination's writing can strike the same balance of humour and horror, but the developer certainly seems to understand what makes this series so important while also being enjoyable in its own right.

IMPRESSIONS

Extermination's Carnage System isn't just a neat physics system but adds to the darkly satirical tone and shows how well Offworld Industries understands the Starship Troopers universe.

TRACK RECORD Before Starship Troopers: Extermination, Offworld Industries' sole title was the long-supported military sim Squad, so it shouldn't be too surprising the team know how to make war with interplanetary bugs feel real.

1 Taking on bigger enemies by yourself isn't a good idea, so team up with other players. 2 Some of the planets can be quite beautiful... until war trashes them. 3 Staying on top of base construction is necessary to deal with the carnage. 4 Even dead bugs pose a threat, boxing you in.

Know your foe

Extermination features several bug variants from throughout the series

01

Tiger Elite Bugs are some of the fastest, heavily armoured, and most dangerous bugs you will come across. Stripy like wasps, and even more horrible.

02

Plasma Grenadier Bugs are a ranged foe that can take down Earth's military outposts with ease. They're priority targets because of their destructive power.

03

As you'd guess from the name, Gunner Bugs can target you from afar, so you need to get up close and take them out before they get your crew.

A Quiet Place: The Road Ahead

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2024 / **PUB** SABER INTERACTIVE
DEV STORMIND GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

The developer of stealthy horror Remothered is back with another sneaky, narrative-forward thriller. In this game, based on the films of the same name, the world has been overtaken by monsters that hunt prey through sound; walk too briskly, step on an exceptionally crunchy leaf, or even just sneeze, and you're on the menu. The Road Ahead takes place a little over three months after the world first goes quiet, following a fresh cast committed to silence in order to survive. Compared to the earlier films, this project already seems much less reluctant either to show you the beasties or to permit going loud to fend them off. When it comes to the question of whether this tie-in manages to be just as chilling, though, we can only keep schtum for now.

Project Tides

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** 2025
PUB FABRAZ / **DEV** FABRAZ
PLAYERS 1

Platforming master Fabraz is back at it again, swapping the infernal flames of its last game, Demon Turf, for a setting that is undeniably way more chill, and really rather appealing looking with its tropical islands and semi-submerged tower blocks. Another 3D platformer boasting 'expressive' movement, Project Tides should feature even deeper traversal mechanics, allowing you to hop, skip, and jump your way across a watery open world.

And when we say 'your way,' we really do mean '*your* way,' as this water park is non-linear, allowing you to whizz up or down its slip-and-slides so long as you can finesse your route. That said, what's a day out without a few dunks in the drink?

Sigma Star Saga

FORMAT TBC / **ETA** 2025
PUB WAYFORWARD
DEV WAYFORWARD / **PLAYERS** 1

Back with a bang, this previously handheld-only RPG-but-with-2D-shootin' is finally reloading after two decades spent MIA, and will be coming to "modern consoles". In it, Allied Earth Federation pilot Ian Recker takes on a deep cover mission into the interstellar Krill Empire, working with humans and aliens on both sides. Besides having deep and meaningful conversations one text box at a time, you'll be flying through shmup-style dogfights. In between upgrading your ship, you'll take to top-down exploration that has its fair share of gunslinging duels too.

An ambitious branching story with multiple possible endings threads through the whole thing – now *that*'s what we call a locked and loaded RPG!

Bleach Rebirth Of Souls

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** TBC
PUB BANDAI NAMCO ENTERTAINMENT
DEV TAMSOFT CORPORATION
PLAYERS 1

Teenager Ichigo Kurosaki becomes a soul reaper after a disastrous chance encounter in this game based on the manga by Tite Kubo, which ran from 2001 to 2016. Forging a pact with another soul reaper, Rukia Kuchiki, Ichigo goes on to cross blades with all the ne'er-do-wells of the underworld. This anime action-'em-up pits you against a whole host of series favourites in bombastic bouts that consistently up the ante. By finding your opening for sword strikes and magical attacks, you can send the opposition skyward, making for flashy aerial combos. This is the first Bleach game we've had since Bleach: Soul Resurrección on PS3, so it's time for a modern take on it.

Ys Memoire: The Oath In Felghana

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** EARLY 2025
PUB MARVELOUS EUROPE
DEV NIHON FALCOM / **PLAYERS** 1

Flame-haired adventurer Adol Christin is back again, *again*. Stick with us because this one's got a bit of a long tail; this memoir is in fact a rerelease of a PSP action RPG, which was itself a remake of the third entry in the series, Wanderers From Ys, that debuted all the way back in 1989. The remake expands on the story of the original (which sees Adol helping his blue-haired pal Dogi, sorting out trouble in the latter's home of Felghana) with new scenes plus revamped visuals, and also enjoys a wealth of quality-of-life features such as Turbo mode. What's more, Adol, who's always been a silent protagonist, has finally found his voice, with voice acting all-new for this release.

Wingspan

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** TBC
PUB MONSTER COUCH
DEV MONSTER COUCH / **PLAYERS** 1-5

Originally a physical card-driven boardgame, this tabletop strategy title is taking wing as a digital release and alighting on PlayStation. As in the non-digital version you and your pals play as fans of all things feathered (ornithologists, bird watchers, and so on), each working to attract the most fantastic plumage to your various wildlife reserves. Once the birdies come home to roost, every card play is about fortifying the preserve in a limited number of turns. Different types of bird boast different abilities and mechanics, with some, such as hawks, suited to heading out for hunting and others better able to strengthen your flock. While it's competitive, it's not exactly aggressive, giving it a unique appeal.

El Paso, Elsewhere

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 6 SEP / **PUB** NIGHTHAWK INTERACTIVE
DEV STRANGE SCAFFOLD / **PLAYERS** 1

Breakups are devastating – especially if your ex turns out to be a literal bloodsucking vampire. In this Max-Payne-inspired shooter, you play as monster hunter James Savage, a man once romantically involved with fanged femme fatale Draculae. She's now intent on ending the world, so Savage locks and loads to blast away everything that goes bump in the night. As it all falls apart in a Texas motel, satisfying slow-mo shooting teams up with surreal, reality-warping level design.

Romancing SaGa 2: Revenge Of The Seven

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 24 OCT
PUB SQUARE ENIX / **DEV** XEEN INC, SQUARE ENIX / **PLAYERS** 1

This RPG plays the long game. It's a ground-up remake of a title from 1993, in which you're tasked with steering the fate of an entire empire over the course of many generations. Picking successive, successful rulers of Avalon is far from all you've got to worry about, though, as seven once-legendary heroes haunt the land on a bloody quest for revenge. Like in other SaGas, traditional experience points and levelling up don't feature here. Instead, characters' individual abilities improve the more they use them in combat – sometimes they'll even think up new moves in the heat of battle.

FORMAT PS5 **/ ETA** 23 AUG **/ PUB** SONY **/ DEV** FIREWALK STUDIOS **/ PLAYERS** 10

Concord

Will this prove to be a shooting star or a waste of space?

We only review finished games, so in Viewpoint we go hands-on with near-final code of a game that just missed our review deadline. Several hours of pre-release play sees Luke Kemp pleasantly surprised so far.

Naming your game has got to be a tricky job. It has to succinctly summarise the experience somehow, be memorable yet not needlessly complex or pretentious, and once you've revealed it to the world that's it, it's locked in. Bearing all that in mind, therefore, naming your live service game one letter away from an airliner that got mothballed after becoming too unpopular and too expensive to run is an… interesting move.

The State Of Play trailer did the game no favours, and doubtless contributed to the reportedly terrible player numbers for the beta over on PC (and, dare we say, the last-minute decision to change the first beta weekend from a preorder exclusive to a download available to all). It came across as something carefully treading within the footsteps of Overwatch, offering nothing that players haven't already seen in that game and elsewhere. The truth is that this isn't the case. At least, not entirely.

Take the character design. There are whispers of Overwatch here, and certainly a dollop of Apex Legends, but the overall vibe is one of the MCU's Guardians Of The Galaxy, in part due to the heavy use of face scans and motion capture that results in a more realistic look. One is called *Star Child*, for heaven's sake. The one that's a clumsy melding of Drax and Thanos.

The trailers certainly won't prepare you for how the characters and their weapons *feel*. The more we play, the clearer it becomes that an incredible amount of time has gone into ensuring that each of the 16 characters is distinct, both from one another and from those found in other games. Haymar's crossbow can be overcharged by aiming down sights for a few seconds, Kyps can temporarily cloak and drop items that highlight enemies, Roka can hover in the air for extended periods, Teo can drop smoke that only he can see through… each character is unique, and a perfectly viable choice.

FIREWALK WITH ME

With 16 characters, each with their own weapons and abilities, there's a danger that it could take a long time to properly understand them all. That's not a concern, however, due to the one thing that has clearly – and wisely – been lifted from Overwatch. The UI has been designed to provide clear summaries of each 'Freegunner' in the menus and, crucially, during play. Your abilities are represented by chunky yet unobtrusive icons, helping you understand which button does what at a glance.

Tankiest characters aside, Concord is a very fast-moving game. There's a brief countdown between dying and respawning, but after that you can usually get back into the thick of the action in seconds. Matches (of the modes we've been able to try) tend to be fairly quick, too, with score limits lower than you might typically expect. A team deathmatch, for example, only requires a score of 30 for the win. It's a rapid, intense experience that is easy to dip in and out of.

Another thing the trailers have struggled to communicate is the map design style, which is *completely* different to that of Overwatch. The presence of ex-Bungie developers shines through in environments that owe more to Destiny and Halo than anything else. Importance is placed on verticality, and bursts of open space punctuated by cover. The maps suit the hectic pace of play perfectly.

Some modes, maps, and features are being held back for launch day, so we haven't seen everything. Nonetheless, an area of concern for us is the actual game modes, which don't appear to have been lavished with the love and care that everything serving them has been. It's just team deathmatch, domination, kill confirmed, and so on under different names. *That* we certainly *have* seen a million times before. It feels like the thoughtfully crafted maps, and the interesting cast of characters with their wild variety of passives, weapons, abilities, and movement speeds and styles, are crying out for something new to do.

We're also not sure how we feel about Concord encouraging us to swap characters throughout matches. Each character confers a bonus to any others you use after them, and these bonuses stack. So, for example, if one character provides extra speed and another better healing, playing those Freegunners first gives both bonuses to the third character that you choose. It's an interesting idea, but this kind of planning seems antithetical to the sense of enjoyable in-the-moment chaos, and many people (us included) prefer to stick with one character. Nonetheless, there's a lot to like here, and we look forward to seeing what the final code has to offer.

VIEWPOINT

"BETTER THAN THE TRAILERS INDICATED, BUT IT STILL HAS MORE TO DO. CAN THE FINAL VERSION PROVIDE THE KICK UP THE BACKSIDE IT NEEDS TO MAKE IT FLY?"

We'll have our full, in-depth review of Concord in an upcoming issue.

1 Some abilities can only be refreshed via pickups generated by fallen enemies; a neat idea. Others can be refilled by a manual charge, if you can find a quiet spot to do it. 2 A lot of time and money has been spent on cutscenes, and more will be added as seasons go on, which is a really, really weird choice for an exclusively PvP game. 3 So far, extra cosmetics that we've seen are all unlockable in-game. Will this change later down the line? We're keeping these lovely gold gloves no matter what. 4 The screen can get busy sometimes, but never confusing, partly thanks to enemy outlines.

THRILLER IN THE MIST

FORMAT PS5
ETA 8 OCT
PUB KONAMI
DEV BLOOBER TEAM, KONAMI
PLAYERS 1

Braving the fog, Jessica Kinghorn visits Konami in Tokyo to go hands-on with the first four hours of the ambitious **Silent Hill 2** remake, from exploring new areas to running in terror from legendary monster Pyramid Head

No longer a requirement of the hardware, Silent Hill's ever-present fog still ensures a sense of unease.

Mary waits for James in their 'special place,' the town of her restless dreams, Silent Hill. An odd choice considering it's a resort spot foggier and drearier than a British summer, not to mention a mite more dangerous. Odder still is the fact that dear old Mary is supposed to be dead. So, what does this letter to James truly say?

For many horror fans, Silent Hill 2 itself is a special place of sorts. Released on PS2 in 2001, its mature story sees James struggling with his own inner demons as much as the town's fleshy horrors in ways far ahead of its time. Like in the very first series entry on PS1 before it, waves of fog cleverly took advantage of a draw-distance consideration to generate unease. But on PS2 improved graphics meant more detailed nightmares chased after James, and wonderfully grimy textures gave the town real, tangible character that kicks into overdrive when the place goes from being simply run down to a rusted-over nightmare as James wanders in and out of alternate Otherworld versions of Silent Hill.

"We fully understand that Silent Hill 2 holds a special place in many people's hearts as being memorable and as a masterpiece," acknowledges the series' lead producer Motoi Okamoto. "So by introducing the remake of this game as the very first major title, we wanted to [demonstrate to] all of our players, all the fans, that Konami is serious about [renewing] the series, and that we are capable of delivering a high-quality Silent Hill game."

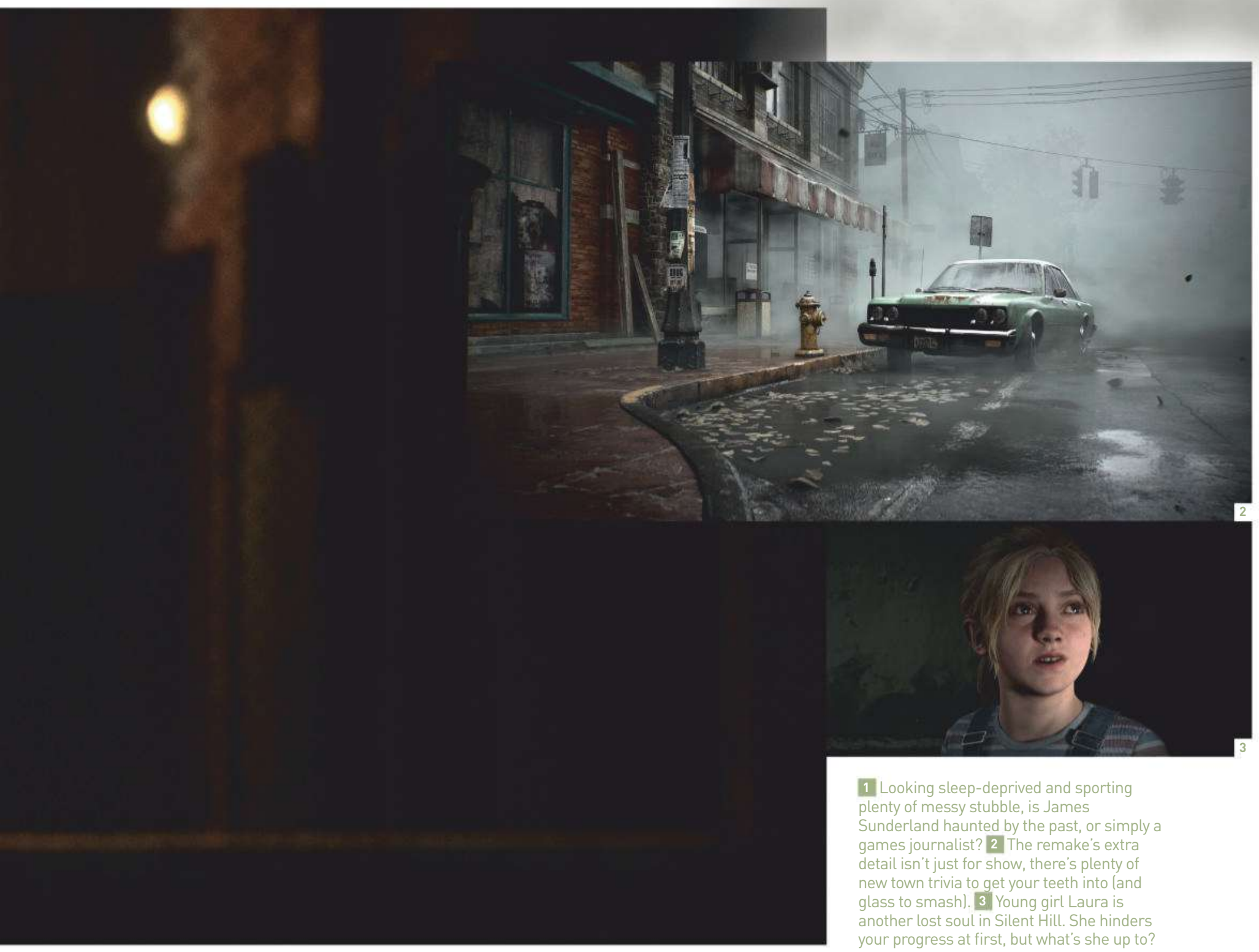
"WE FULLY UNDERSTAND THAT SILENT HILL 2 HOLDS A SPECIAL PLACE IN MANY PEOPLE'S HEARTS AS BEING MEMORABLE AND A MASTERPIECE."

Stumbling through foggy streets and pitch-black hallways at a fixed distance made James truly feel like a lost soul, while brief encounters with the other troubled people drawn to the liminal town offered cryptic insight. So how do you remake and modernise a game like Silent Hill 2, which is so defined by the conditions in which it was originally released?

CAUGHT ON CAMERA

The answer Konami and Bloober Team have arrived at is to remain as faithful to the original as possible, while doing everything they can to heighten the sense of tension and unease. The most obvious change we notice when going hands-on is how much closer the camera is to the action, framing tightly over James' shoulder. Watching James getting lost from afar was scary enough, but now we're better brought into the action, fighting our way through the fog just like he is. It's a claustrophobic and uncomfortable viewpoint that'd be annoying in a lot of other games, but works wonderfully here, especially when we let our guard down. There's no escape, with every new corner soon becoming one that *you* hesitantly poke your head around, edging into the unknown of your telly screen. Every gruesome horror out to lunge at James is also lunging at *you*.

But before the nightmare truly begins to tighten around James' psyche, let's rewind to the ratty bathroom in which he's splashing his remade, stubbly mug with water, pondering Mary's letter. All in one cutscene, we follow him outside to the observation deck where he's parked



1 Looking sleep-deprived and sporting plenty of messy stubble, is James Sunderland haunted by the past, or simply a games journalist? 2 The remake's extra detail isn't just for show, there's plenty of new town trivia to get your teeth into (and glass to smash). 3 Young girl Laura is another lost soul in Silent Hill. She hinders your progress at first, but what's she up to?

his car, giving him a view that's so much more than a splash of flat texture, taking a wide view of the mirror-like surface of Toluca Lake, which cradles the town.

Gaining control, we do what any survival horror gamer does best: rifle through James' car. Picking up the map that's still on the back seat, we venture toward town along a woodland walk. James' initially slow pace leaves room for atmosphere, especially as a gentle haptic rumble from the DualSense plays on our fears that something just out of shot may be following close behind. Soon picking up the pace with L1, we gladly take off in what we'd hesitate to call a sprint; it's more of a jog. This James has been at the cardio, though – while he does sound a little out of breath from time to time, he's able to keep moving at pace without worrying too much about stamina management (putting world-famous author Alan Wake to shame).

Partway down the path we come across a graveyard and meet Angela, a woman drawn to the town in search of her family, who warns us of its danger – not that James cares. Mary's letter compels him, though it's not the only thing rattling around in his head. A save point in a nearby well draws us close in to checkpoint our progress, and James comments that it feels like someone is rooting around his skull. It's a neat metatextual touch that reminds us that as close as we are to James, we're still a distinct, voyeuristic entity merely puppeting his actions. Might this be something the remake plays with later on?

Sploshing underfoot, we realise that as faithful as our chat with Angela was to the original (the new voice acting is effective), some changes have been made. The church grounds are now half-flooded, Toluca Lake's water encroaching into the town's reality. What is fog, after all, but water vapour? – and we run the risk of becoming fully submerged.

There's still only one path forward, just like in the original. Jogging past the unsettling cornfields of Silent Hill »

1

2

Ranch, windswept rustling makes you second-guess at the Kingian nightmare hidden within.

AUTO PARTS REPLACE

While the ranch is only somewhere we walk by, other parts of the town have been expanded and renovated with an extra coat of peeling paint. Before we can enter the town proper we reach a new locked gate connected to Auto Service & Tires. A note from the mechanic says they've popped into town, and that spare keys are in the drawer. Judging by the yellowed, weathered paper it seems he left some time ago, but the sound of a bolt tinkling along the floor within makes us wonder if the place really is empty.

We vault through the window – a new traversal move that can be used by James *and* enemies alike – and begin to explore the building. This is the first of many fresh detours that make Silent Hill feel more like a once-lived-in place than a lineup of doors too rusty to open. James, on the other hand, isn't standing still, with a quick-turn on R1 helping us to check our six. Both the map and quick-use items can be easily accessed with single button presses (and your full inventory is slick to navigate from the touchpad).

Creeped-out but safe, we keep moving forward and feel increasingly confident in our movement. The layout of the town's streets feels faithful to what we remember, but here they're richly detailed and better built-out – it's like navigating a space we half-remember from a dream. But, ah, that blood splatter is hard to forget, as is the oddly shaped silhouette shambling into the fog ahead.

Following the trail – perhaps unwisely – we're led on by sounds of crooning and clattering. Before we can make sense of what's drawing near as we approach in the fog, it crashes through a fence and barrels into a nearby townhouse. We follow. These vacuum-packed creatures make a lot more sound than before – it almost feels like chasing a gremlin along its trail of destruction. James calls, limply, "Hello?" If it were us in this situation, we'd definitely be muttering more expletives. Then again, we'd *probably* not follow the blood trail even further into the foggy, bad-vibes town either.

A hole in the house's garage is wreathed in white cloth, signposting areas of interaction – there's no yellow paint here. When we press ⊗, James gets on his belly and crawls through, before then shimmying through a gap in a brick wall. The townhouse feels fairly '50s, but with rotting paint peeling away. Undeterred by the horror, there's time to rifle through drawers and stuff health drinks into our pockets before the low ebb of radio static rises.

A fleshy figure crashes through the bare boards of the opposite wall. Before we can even register what it is, we react, hitting R2 to bash it with a loose plank of wood. We dodge its sickly spewing with ◎, before charging ahead with the same button and knocking it flat. R2 again brutally

1 The iconic red squares return as save points. The suggestion of a lightly metatextual element may be a winking nod to Silent Hill 3. 2 PS5 doesn't hurt for draw distance, but the beautifully rendered fog is plenty atmospheric. The DualSense's haptics also add to the sense of unease at key moments. 3 It might not be the cleanest bathroom in the world, but when you've gotta go, you've gotta go. 4 Phew, a friendly nurse to help James heal his wounds. Wait, hold on...

finishes off the whining creature. "Whatever it is, it's not human," mutters James. Get this guy a detective game, stat.

The radio crackles back to life, but instead of heralding danger it now gives way to a voice calling out to James: Mary's.

STATIC SHOCK

The connection is bad, but it's enough to encourage us to press forward. The tussle inside is just a precursor of what's to come, the streets sparsely (for now) populated by horrors ready to get the jump on us whenever the radio buzzes. Stocking up on health drinks (and, later, ammo) will be vital, but it's up to you whether you want to explore every nook and cranny available, as dangers lie in wait as well. Some valuable resources are even hidden in cars, meaning James has to smash the glass to get his hands on them, shards tumbling away differently each time.

The path forward closely resembles the chain of clues that leads you all over town in the original game, but each location has more character – from the dilapidated Neely's Bar being more than just a burnt-out husk (though still housing hella ominous graffiti) to Saul Apartments giving you multiple new developments to poke around. Detours like this feel like worthy additions to James' journey, being additive without compromising the foundations of what came before. It feels like there's more lore to pick through, but from what we've seen it stops short of being *too* on-the-nose.

A truly unsettling playlist scores this intro, though long-time Silent Hill composer Akira Yamaoka explains that "all of the tracks [you'll recognise] have been reworked from the ground up." With nine hours of music (longer than Wagner's Ring Cycle, as a Konami PR helpfully notes), from industrial arrangements that leave you on edge to melancholy guitar riffs, he quips "How in the world are we going to fit all this into a soundtrack?" Acknowledging that the remake will be as much for new fans as those who loved the original, Yamaoka says of the new arrangements that "We want to make sure everyone has a fresh experience."

IT'S UP TO YOU WHETHER YOU WANT TO EXPLORE EVERY NOOK AND CRANNY AVAILABLE, AS DANGERS LIE IN WAIT AS WELL. SOME RESOURCES ARE EVEN HIDDEN IN CARS

CLEAN LIVING

Which means it's a good couple of hours before we even get to the Wood »

SILENT HILL 2

1 "The way forward is through this ominously lit and rusted door? What a sweet kid for helping out!" 2 Pyramid Head's a tough lad, but lacks Sephiroth's biceps, meaning he drags his trademark scissor sword behind him. Listen out for the scraping... 3 James carefully ponders all the ways his own skeleton could betray him the next time he gets a battering. 4 James will acquire some punchy guns, but don't waste ammo carelessly.

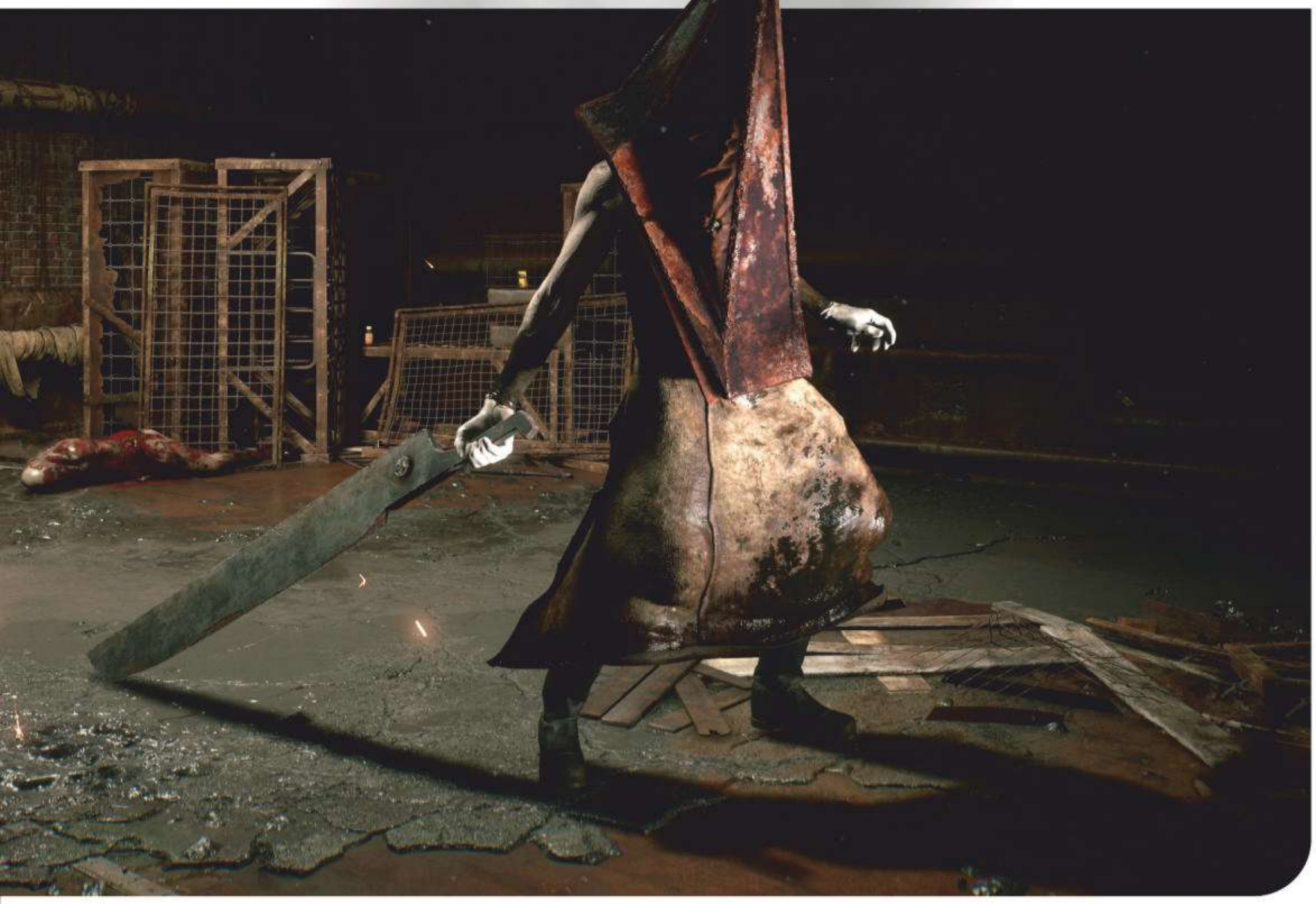
Side and Blue Creek apartment blocks – the first major interior location in the original game. If you're concerned about the remake being more action-heavy, you needn't worry; if anything the remake's intro is a slower, steadier build.

"It was very tricky, because obviously you want to stay true to the original, and the original was very slow at the beginning," shares Maciej Głomb, lead producer at Bloober Team. "We actually discussed a lot of different approaches to that; we discussed making it more action-heavy at the beginning," he continues. "But, this is, you know, Silent Hill – this is why we made the choice to keep it as it was and only pick up the pace after some time."

That's what informed the additive approach, rather than overseasoning Silent Hill 2's original secret sauce. Mateusz Lenart, Bloober Team's creative director, adds: "At the very beginning, we didn't want to change anything completely, because we were too afraid of [even] touching the game." It's understandably daunting, but taking no chances at all would make us wonder 'What was the point?' Lenart continues, "[But] after a time, we [saw] that [we needed] to expand on [the original] to create a game that would be competitive in this generation of consoles."

The terror simmers as we pick through the apartments. You'd best believe this maze of doors has odd obstructions, missing handles, locked doors, and arcane codes to break. The unsettling feeling of being in a building with so many walls hiding lord knows what is emphasised here in the remake to great effect. There's always the sound of something bad happening mere floors above, distant screams or muffled gunfire deadened by layers of wood and memory.

Threats start out imagined, but quickly move into the real after you've got a few tricksy puzzles under your belt (and yes, these conundrums have



their own difficulty settings). More of the strange, wrapped-up figures wriggle across the ground, lulling us into a false sense of security as later hallways host enemies that move like nothing in the original, crawling along the walls with twisted limbs. Reader: when we see them, we shriek, and we can't count the number of times we've replayed Silent Hill 2.

"As for the creatures we have some minor updates," undersells Motoi Okamoto, as he introduces us to a new variant of the mannequins, named the spider mannequin. "We have also replaced and remapped all the enemies from where they were placed in the original so everyone can have a fresh take on combat," he adds. At least we have an excuse for the shrieking. And so too do the monsters – the ever uncomfortably vocal enemies are even more so, leaving us paradoxically concerned about the strange, twitching bodies we pummel to bits.

HEADS UP

Creature designer and Silent Hill vet Masahiro Ito tells us that all the creature redesigns are faithful to the team's original visions. Most changes have been informed by improvements to the combat mechanics with, he notes, "some minor variance – some very visual, slight changes to all of the enemy designs."

"WE HAVE REPLACED AND REMAPPED ALL THE ENEMIES FROM WHERE THEY WERE PLACED IN THE ORIGINAL SO EVERYONE CAN HAVE A FRESH TAKE ON COMBAT."

Some of these terrors are more demanding to deal with, of a piece with the series' more action-heavy contemporaries, but crucially, even after we pick up a handgun from a bullet-splattered room, combat still isn't the focus. "While we have said that we have revamped and reworked the combat design overall," Ito continues, "we want to place emphasis that this game is not supposed to be oriented heavily towards combat."

One Ito design in particular emphasises this: the Executioner, or the Pyramid-Headed thing himself. Teased out of reach at first, we get up close and personal for the first time when James passes through an apartment only to realise the creature is scarcely inches away. Hiding in a closet as the horror brutally attacks a mannequin, it gets a bit Blue Velvet as the Pyramid Head discards its prey and draws close. Readying the gun, James opens fire, but the thing barely reacts before shambling away.

It's clear from here that methodically clearing rooms isn't Silent Hill's way. In some situations, you're better off aiming to survive to fight another day – as long as you've got enough resources to keep pushing forward. Puzzles abound, from clocks to murals, but the thought of that lurking creature lingers, and when we think we're nearly free of the oppressive buildings, we're cornered – just a hulking man with a strange metal head, an extremely long sword, and us with nowhere to run. We'll see if we escape come October.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Two is always
better than one.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

FORMAT PS5
ETA 15 NOV
PUB UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT QUEBEC
PLAYERS 1

Lex Luddy spends some quality time with **Assassin's Creed Shadows**' protagonists Naoe and Yasuke, digging into how your choices can affect how missions play out

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

The Assassin's Creed series has covered a lot of known history, from AC Odyssey taking place in 431 BCE to AC Syndicate pushing up against modernity in 1860s England (and AC Unity featuring a flash-forward to Nazi-occupied Paris in 1944). However, across the 13 mainline titles, eight console spinoffs, several mobile games, countless graphic novels, an audio drama, and a better-forgotten movie, there is one setting the series has never properly delved into despite near-universal pleas from fans: Japan. Until now, that is.

In some ways the timing couldn't have been better. The world is primed for another Japan-set historical epic given the ongoing popularity of games like Ghost Of Tsushima, Rise Of The Ronin, and Nioh, and the runaway success of TV shows like Shogun and Blue Eye Samurai. But it also means AC Shadows' devs have work to do if they want it to stand out.

The game follows dual protagonists Fujibayashi Naoe and Yasuke through Japan's war-torn late Sengoku period. Much like previous AC games, the story walks the line between historical accuracy and wild fiction where you fight godlike beings. While Naoe, a kunoichi (a term often used for female ninja or shinobi), is an original character, her father in the game, Fujibayashi Nagato, was a real person who led the Iga jonin (again, what we'd call ninja today). On the other hand, the second protagonist, Yasuke, is completely based on a real historical figure – the first time Ubisoft has done so for an Assassin's Creed protagonist. Thought to have been brought to Japan from Africa by Western priests, he was enlisted by Oda Nobunaga (who has himself appeared in plenty of games) as a samurai. With scant historical record, especially after 1582, Yasuke's unusual position as the first Black samurai has sparked the imagination of historical fiction writers for many years.

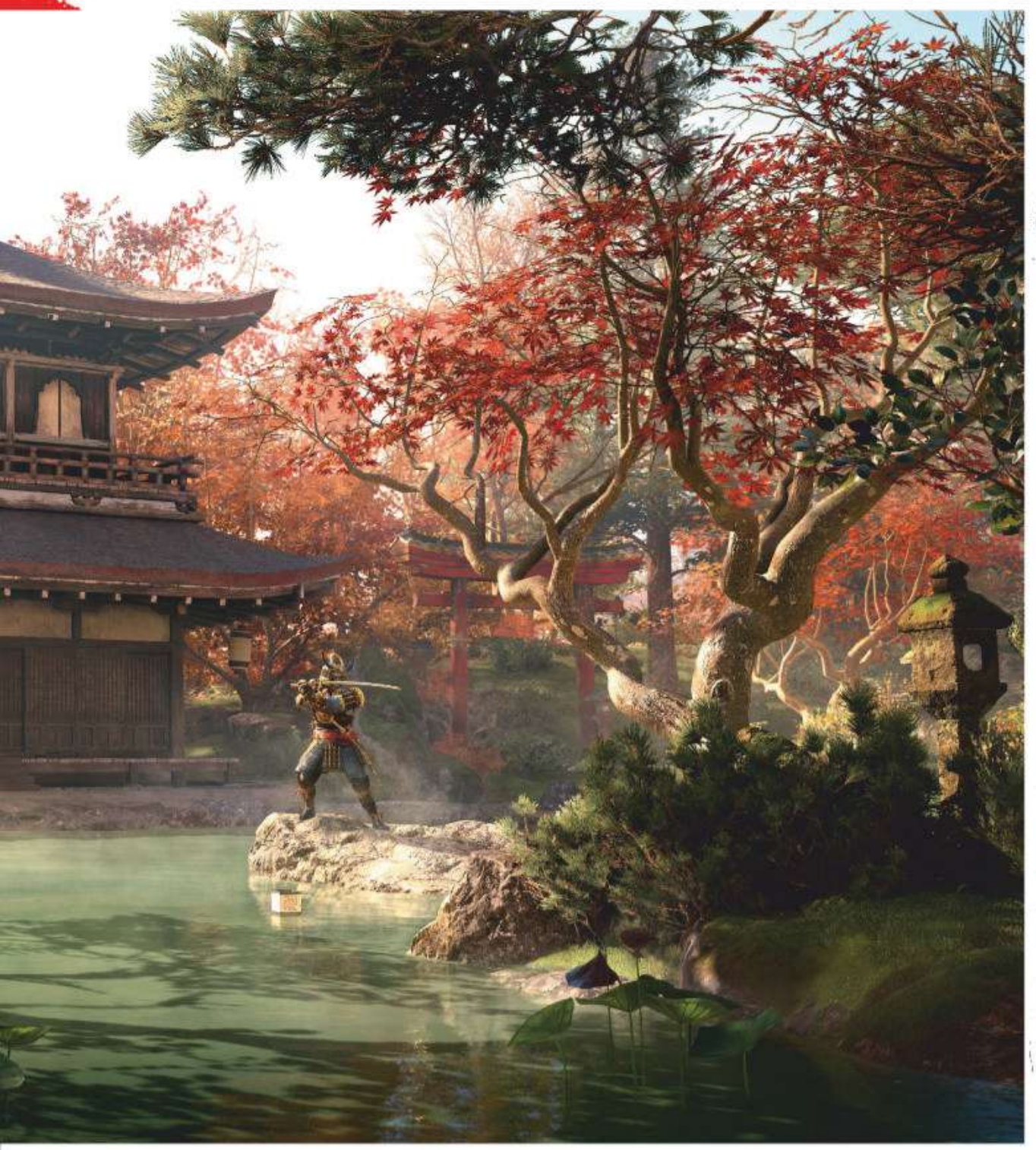
1 The calm before the (rather impressive) storm. 2 Picking Yasuke or Naoe doesn't limit you to playing in a particular way.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

The doubling up of protagonist helps distinguish Shadows. It's not the first time Assassin's Creed has starred two heroes – Syndicate featured both Evie and Jacob Frye (later games gave you the choice of a female or male hero, but the one you chose was the solo star). That one was developed by Ubisoft Quebec, as is Shadows, and the slight focus on stealth for Evie and brawling for Jacob even mirrors the divide between Naoe and Yasuke. But almost a decade has passed between the two games, giving the devs time to hone playing with dual heroes to a fine point.

Naoe and Yasuke contrast not just narratively, but mechanically. At first, as in the public demo, we're shown Yasuke taking on samurai in a village brawl, before Naoe breaks into Fukuchiyama castle using a nocturnal storm as cover for an assassination. However, we're also shown how differently the castle break-in can go if you take a different approach as Naoe, or pick Yasuke to tackle it.

Naoe plays like a more traditional AC character; her nimble movement and assassin's robes help facilitate her jumping between rooftops unnoticed, while a grappling hook (which seems to function similarly to



"NAOE'S GOT MORE STEALTH OPTIONS THAN ALMOST ANY PREVIOUS ASSASSINS, INCLUDING THE ABILITY TO GO PRONE."

Jin Sakai's in Ghost Of Tsushima) helps her cover wider gaps. It's worth noting that her movement and parkour seem to be more in line with the original games. She needs to find discrete handholds to methodically clamber over surfaces, lacking Eivor's and Kassandra's uncanny ability to scale almost any surface.

We're sure there'll be plentiful pagodas to enable Naoe to get the drop on enemies, but staying hidden isn't just a matter of taking the high road. She's got more stealth options than almost any previous assassins, including the ability to nab a reed to breathe while submerged underwater, and to go prone, taking a page from Solid Snake's book to crawl along the ground inch-by-inch while remaining unseen.

This isn't to say Naoe is useless in a fight, though she'll get hurt more easily than the heavily armoured Yasuke. Our first look ends with the swift assassination of Lord Hayashi at the point of a hidden blade before a chaotic fight as his men run in to take revenge. The counter-and-dodge-based combat is similar to that of AC Mirage's throwback to the original games. But sometimes it's best to cut and run, and Naoe escapes.

WHO NEEDS STEALTH?

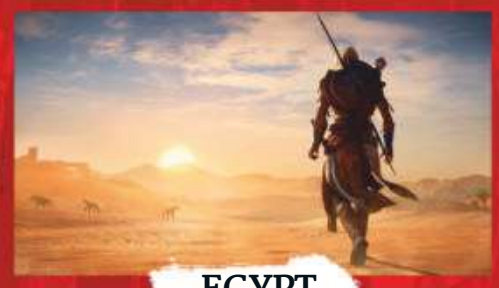
Naoe might be a silent assassin, but Yasuke is built like a brick outhouse… if that brick outhouse was clad in

TRAVEL AGENTS

Our favourite Assassin's Creed settings over the years

RENAISSANCE ITALY

ACII was a definitive entry in the series, the red rooftops of Florence drawing us in just as much as the suave Ezio. Touring famous cities and leaping across Venetian canals was a highlight too.



EGYPT

AC Origins introduced a jaw-dropping open world, and gave us plenty of reason to follow leads across it on the path to avenge our son. Clambering pyramids was a perfect addition to the series.

THE CARIBBEAN

Colourful, vibrant islands were a plus for ACIV: Black Flag, but what really captured us were the spans of water between. The lush blue was perfect for a bit of piracy. The sea calls us even now.

VICTORIAN LONDON

Grimy though the city may be, the chaotic hustle and bustle made for a great setting in AC Syndicate. A grappling hook made rooftops accessible, while jumping along boats on the Thames was a must.

ANCIENT GREECE

AC Odyssey's huge open world feels like a bunch of mini ones with islands aplenty. Given the way the story embraced myth, you're never sure what lies in wait, be it a minotaur or familial strife.

1 Yasuke's club is a kanabo – so hefty it takes two hands to wield it, with spikes at the business end to make it even more effective in battle. **2** Like in other recent Assassin's Creeds, mission waypoints will sometimes only give you a general direction of where to go.

armour and decked out with state-of-the-art (for the era) weaponry. Rolling back to the village brawl with Yasuke, we take a look at what would happen if he kept going from there. Yasuke is more headstrong than Naoe, and as a result, he doesn't bother waiting for the cover of night. He's also not as nimble as his co-protagonist since he's weighed down by that aforementioned heavy samurai armour. Instead of dashing across rooftops, Yasuke goes through the front door… literally. The only equipment he needs to deal with a lock is his shoulder and a good run-up.

He can make short work of towering guards as well, though you may want to pull out his brutal kanabo spiked club to do so. It's hard to overstate just how vicious and satisfying the thing is thanks to the devastating animations of hard-hitting carnage, and how enemies ragdoll through the air and tumble across the floor, each hefty swing pushing through Hayashi's guards like they're nothing.

With Yasuke it's a case of tackling problems head-on rather than going over and above them. He's like a one-man army. His club and katana are just the start, as he also carries a gun for ranged encounters. Matchlock guns were a core weapon during the bloody Sengoku era – and this helps set AC Shadows apart from the likes of Ghost Of Tsushima (set 300 years before this game). As well as extreme civil war, Japan was also dealing with external pressures. Yasuke's own lord, Oda Nobunaga, was just one of many clan leaders who sought to unify Japan. In 1579, towards the end of the Sengoku period, throughout AC Shadows one of the bloodiest periods in Japan's history is all coming to a head.

"YASUKE IS LIKE A ONE MAN-ARMY. HIS CLUB AND KATANA ARE JUST THE START, AS HE ALSO CARRIES A GUN."

OLD MEETS NEW

It's not the first time AC has embraced weighty, meaty combat. Yasuke's fighting style is similar to the RPG fighting of Assassin's Creeds from Origins to Valhalla, where dodging is de-emphasised in favour of blocking and parries and it's more about wearing down an enemy's stamina to open them up to devastating blows. But in having two characters, Ubisoft

SAMURAI ASSASSIN

Meet your two new faves

YASUKE

Based on a real samurai of the same name, Yasuke is an enslaved African brought to Japan by Jesuits who was quickly enlisted by Oda Nobunaga to serve in his army as a samurai. While documentation of Yasuke almost vanishes toward the end of the Sengoku era, he has remained popular in Japanese media, appearing in several anime, manga, and games (including Nioh and Samurai Warriors 5) and acting as the inspiration for characters like Nagoriyuki in Guilty Gear and the titular character in Takashi Okazaki's Afro Samurai manga.

In Shadows Yasuke appears as a strong-willed samurai who becomes entangled with the assassins. He is adept with swords, spears, rifles, and a two-handed club known as a kanabo. But given what we do know about his real-life history, will he ultimately hold a grudge against the assassins or be able to work with them for the greater good?

"GIVEN WHAT WE KNOW OF HISTORY, WILL YASUKE HOLD A GRUDGE AGAINST THE ASSASSINS?"

"IT HAS BEEN STATED THAT NAOE'S FATHER GAVE HER HER ASSASSIN'S HIDDEN BLADE."

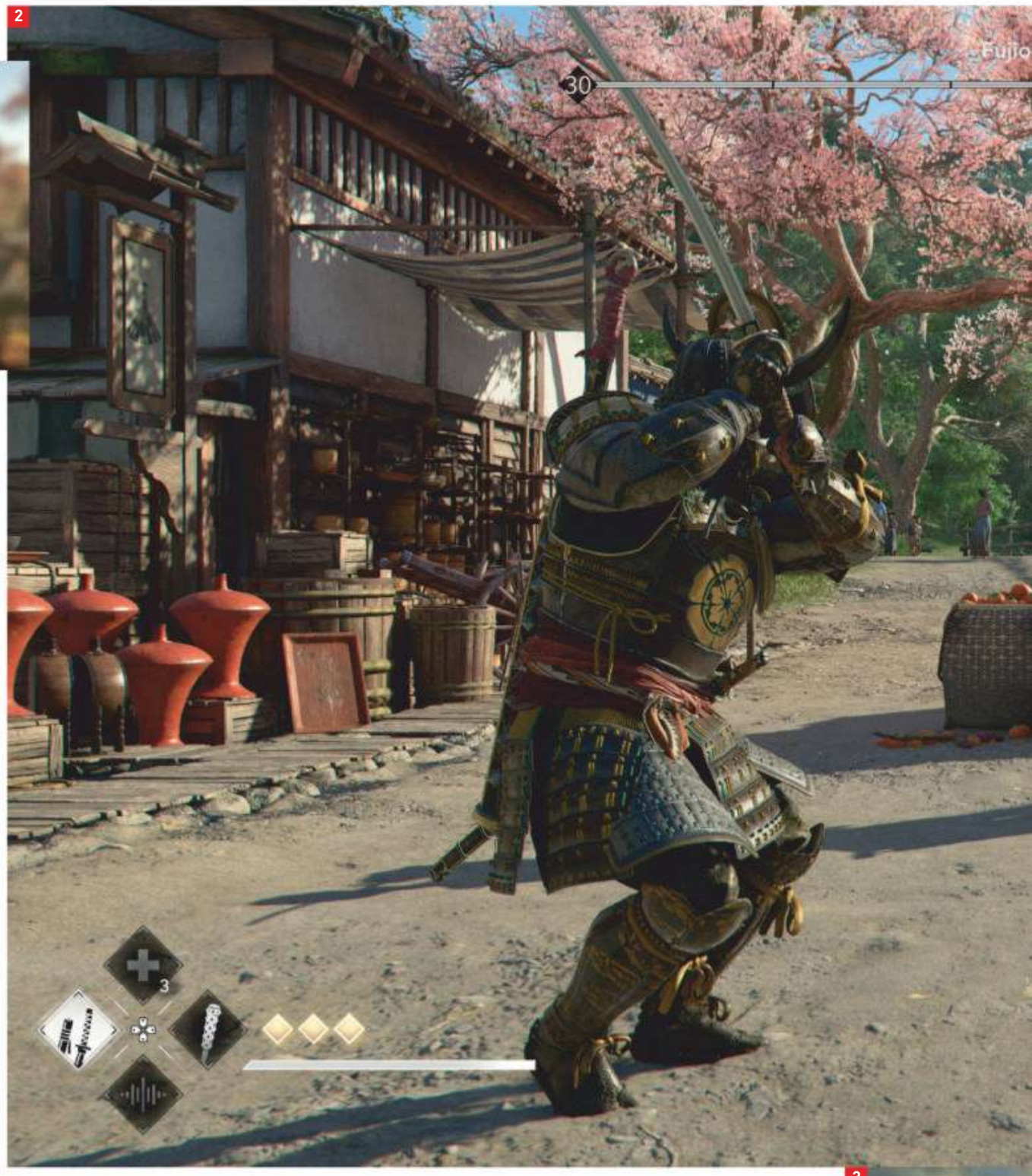
NAOE

Fujibayashi Naoe is a totally fictional character created for Assassin's Creed Shadows, however, her father in the story, Fujibayashi Nagato, was a famed Iga jonin in 16th-century Japan in reality.

Naoe was trained in the art of ninjutsu by her father and we've seen her wielding a katana, kusarigama, shuriken, kunai, and smoke bombs.

Ubisoft has yet to confirm how Naoe gets entangled with The Order Of Assassins but it has been stated that her father gave Naoe her hidden blade, meaning this is most likely another time AC has played fast and loose with historical figures and how much they may or may had to do with secret societies in the shadows.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

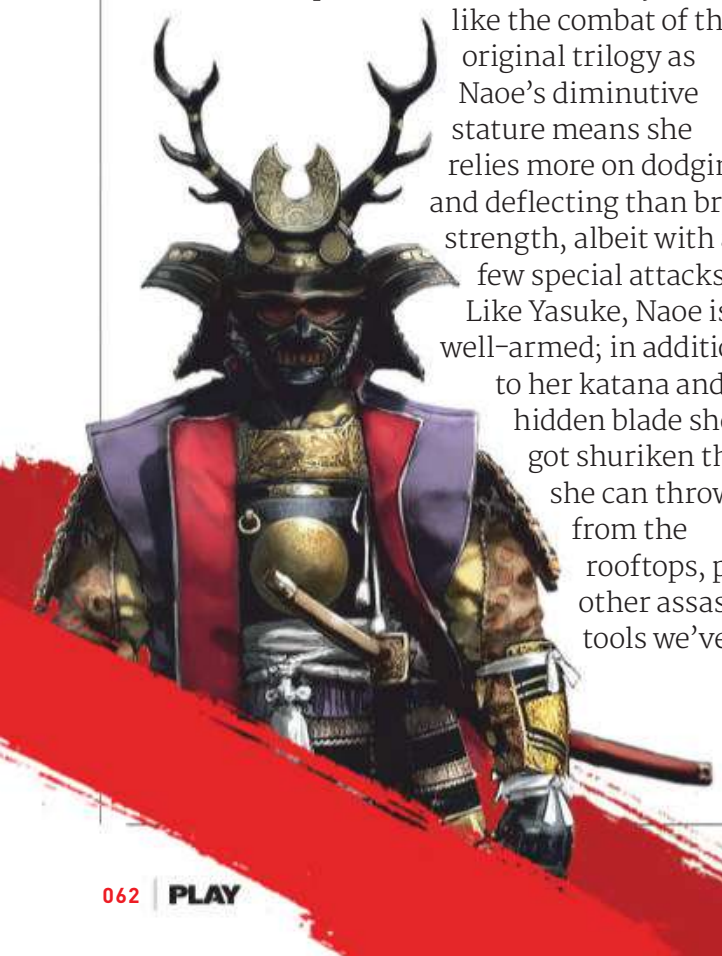


1 We hear Hooded Assassin chic is in fashion this winter. 2 Even compared to other samurai Yasuke strikes an imposing figure. 3 Naoe's grappling hook enables her to cross large gaps without needing to set a foot on the ground. 4 Some things in Assassin's Creed never change... like the fact guards never look up.

Quebec has given itself more room to lean into going ham with big weapons as Yasuke rather than forcing a character who looks like a bodybuilder carrying a great axe to hide behind cover to pull off stealth kills as was the case in past games.

That said, like in those games, both Naoe and Yasuke have access to special attacks triggered by holding L2 and pressing a face button, activating moves like Yasuke's area-of-effect jumping club slam. It appears that each character's weapons will have three special attacks, operating on cooldowns.

Naoe's combat prowess comes to the fore in our third look at the castle break-in. This time Naoe opts not to wait for nightfall, also choosing to mount an assault in broad daylight. Rather than employing pure stealth, we see our fleet-footed protagonist taking on guards more than twice her size by jumping out of hiding for one-on-one encounters, then losing heat in order to pull off another surprise attack. It's definitely more like the combat of the original trilogy as Naoe's diminutive stature means she relies more on dodging and deflecting than brute strength, albeit with a few special attacks.



Like Yasuke, Naoe is well-armed; in addition to her katana and hidden blade she's got shuriken that she can throw from the rooftops, plus other assassin tools we've come to know and love, such as the smoke bomb. It makes for incredibly satisfying, fast stealth that'd make the likes of Ezio blush as Naoe clears the encampment in broad daylight like, well... a shadow.

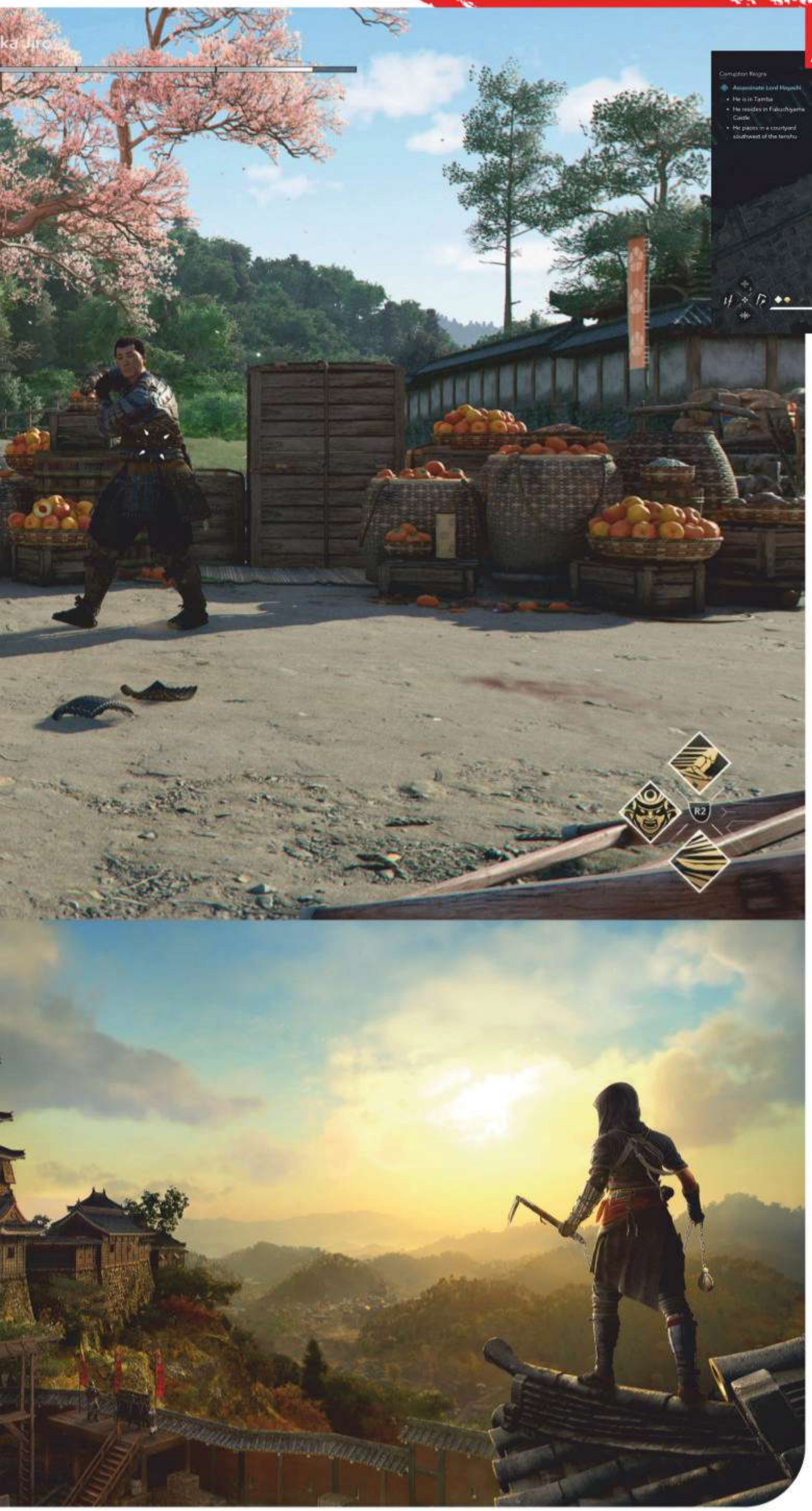
It's great to have the choice of playing loudly or quietly depending on what you want, though we've yet to see if we'll always have the option. At one moment in our demo, during a stealth assassination, Naoe is grabbed by a large enemy, flung into supplies, and then swarmed by enemies. Is that the result of messing up a prompt, or a scripted encounter?

The good news is that Naoe is more than capable when things go sideways, thanks in large part to a combination of her special attacks and kusarigama (a hook-and-chain weapon). It's nice to see a return to the hyper-animated dodging and parrying fans of the older games have been yearning for, but we're not sure if the existence of the special attacks (which often seem to be one-hit kills) on cooldowns will trivialise some of the challenge and fun of these encounters. It's an odd choice given Yasuke is already right there.

"NAOE'S DIMINUTIVE STATURE MEANS SHE RELIES MORE ON DODGING AND DEFLECTING THAN BRUTE STRENGTH."

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

And that's just one mission. There's a lot to the game beyond sneaking or fighting, and lots of systems that'll



4

Completion Reqmts
Assassinate Lord Hayashi
• He is in Tamba
• He resides in Fukuchiyama Castle
• He paces in a courtyard southwest of the tenshu
Fukuchiyama Castle
Assassinate

influence how you approach those things. A day/night cycle and seasonal weather will impact things greatly. During Naoe's night infiltration, as the storm rages the rain spitting down seems to hinder enemies' senses by lowering visibility and drowning out some of our noise. What's more, during the daytime encounter we can hear and see the storm rolling in, grey clouds slowly engulfing the sky and thunder occasionally pounding overhead. Ubisoft has talked a lot about how seasonal weather might impact action, giving the example of breaking icicles to distract enemies during the winter. However, it remains to be seen how systemic these mechanics are and if they will truly affect the experience to the point that one player taking a mission in August will have a different experience to someone doing it in November.

Nevertheless, with near-countless ways to approach these more traditional Assassin's Creed missions, we're eager to play more. But we still have some questions. How well-realised will Yasuke and Naoe be, given the game has to split attention between the two of them? (Dialogue between them feels stilted in what we've seen – though it's early in their relationship here). Will the meta-progression be laden with colour-coded loot like previous 'RPG-style' entries? And, most importantly, how much impact will the modern-day storyline have? While Valhalla left the door open for plenty of weirdness, it feels like more casual Assassin's Creed fans are beginning to tire of how convoluted that story has become, just like they did with Desmond's arc. Yet that game's ending implications feel too large to go ignored here. But as for the question as to whether all the years asking for Assassin's Creed to tackle Japan has been worth the wait? We're feeling optimistic. ■

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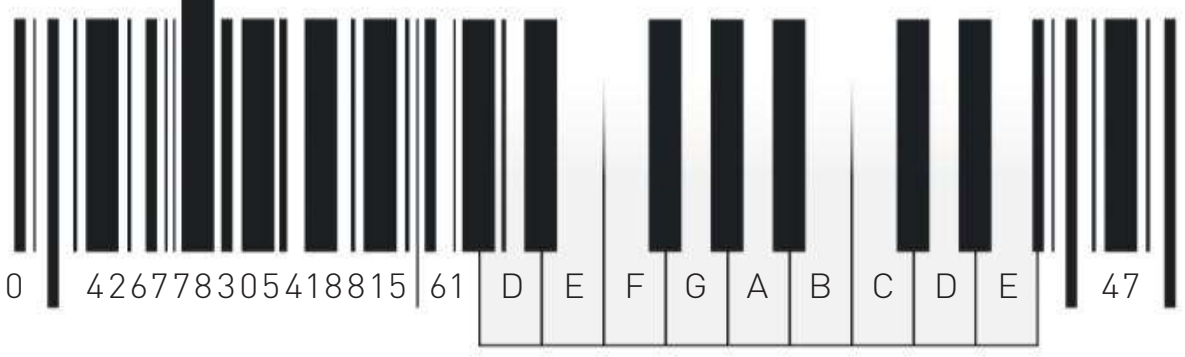
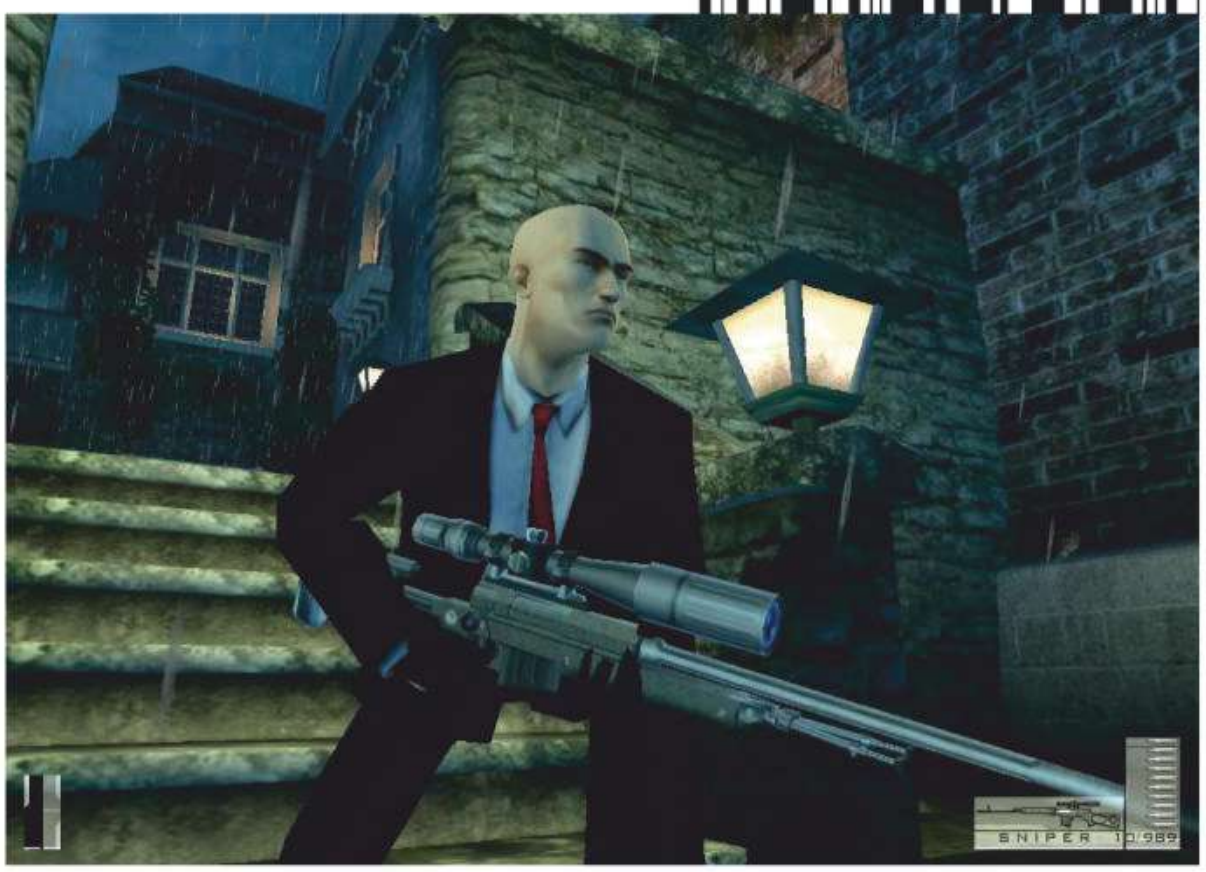
THE SOUND OF SILENCERS



Jesper Kyd and **David Bateson** talk to Luke Kemp about the music, voice, and mind of **Hitman**'s Agent 47

Photo: Joanna Gałuszka

David Bateson taking a hands-on approach with Jesper Kyd.



Sniping, for when you don't have patience to wait for the whites of their eyes.

Within seconds of our Zoom call, before we've asked a single question, we learn something revealing and important. Jesper Kyd and David Bateson have a warm, easy relationship with one another built on immense mutual respect. Perhaps this should come as no surprise; although they never worked together directly on any of the games (and only met up for the first time in 2019), their respective areas of Hitman's aural landscape meld together perfectly.

We speak with them shortly before Bateson is due to perform at 2024's Gaming X Symphony concert. "It's taking the theme music from soundtracks from different computer games," he explains, "[with] 104 musicians and 100 choir. And three or four soloists, of which I'm one."

"It's four sold-out concerts," adds Kyd, "at the big opera house in Copenhagen. I couldn't believe the amount of tickets you guys sold." The fourth concert was added due to popular demand and, like the first three, sold out almost immediately.

A great game soundtrack takes on a life of its own. Kyd is a master at creating them, with an enviable CV that includes scores for entries in series such as Assassin's Creed, Borderlands, Warhammer, and much more. He scored the first four Hitman games – winning a BAFTA in 2005 for his work on Contracts – and was there for the birth of everybody's favourite paid killer.

GREAT DANES

"Prior to IO Interactive, there was a company called Zyrinx," Kyd explains. "These were my teenage friends. We started a game company when, I think, we were 19. Our first game got sold to Sega, and so we moved to the US. We did some more games, and we didn't get paid for some games that were released. And so my friends all went back to Denmark. They were asking me to come with them and become part of their new company. But I decided I was going to stay, because I wanted to do music for more than one game every three years. I had a lot of music in me and still do. So I declined, and they went back home and started IO Interactive. I knew they were going to be successful – these are some of the most successful people and talented people that I've ever met – but I just knew I had to stay. Their first game was Hitman. I was so glad that they asked me to write the music for that. We'd worked together for so many years, on so many things, that they trusted me and gave me a lot of creative freedom."

This unique relationship, where Kyd was essentially writing music for his longtime friends, allowed scoring the Hitman games to more closely resemble writing music for film than for videogames. "When working in film, you work very closely with a director. And you often end up becoming friends with the director, because you become very close over quite a long period of time. You're working every day, trying to fulfil his vision and mixing it with what your contribution is, and trying to find that fine line. That's how it was working on Hitman. There's only a select few cases where you really get to work with the most creative people on the project. Assassin's Creed II, I was working directly with Patrice [Désilets, creative director]. Not all the time, but at times, and you've got a link straight to the creativity. Often [with] videogames, you end up working with an audio department. So it's a little bit different. If you have questions, sometimes they have the answer, other times, they're going to have to get back to you. Right? So the conversation is not always as free flowing. Working on Hitman, and Freedom Fighters, and Kane & Lynch, there was so much creative freedom to bring my vision forth."

"THERE'S ONLY A SELECT FEW CASES WHERE YOU REALLY GET TO WORK WITH THE MOST CREATIVE PEOPLE ON THE PROJECT."

At one point during his acting career Bateson found himself visiting Denmark for work, but he fell in love with the country and ended up moving there, where he still lives

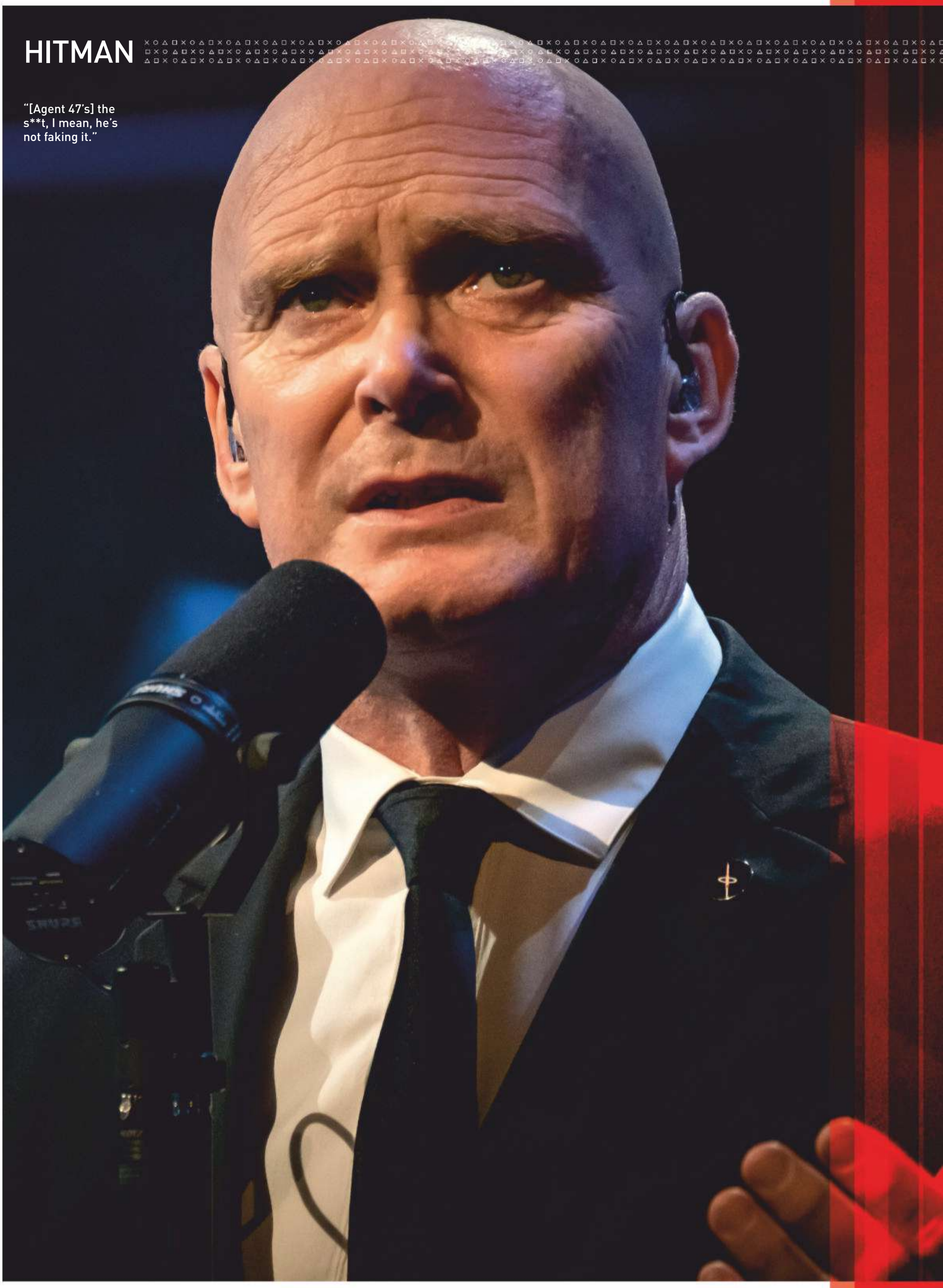
Photo: Ben Bentley

HITMAN

"You become your own worst critic [with a lot of creative freedom]."

HITMAN

"[Agent 47's] the s**t, I mean, he's not faking it."



today. His voiceover work (which he says he fell into "by accident") initially consisted primarily of corporate gigs whenever a male English-speaking voice was required. Until, one day…

DON'T FEAR T RIEPER

"I was in a studio doing a corporate thing. And that studio was also making the graphics for the first game. They actually interrupted my session. They opened the door and said, 'David! Listen, if you get a minute afterwards, could you come in and have a look at the graphics of this computer game we're developing? We need a voice. We've got the *character*, but we don't know what he should sound like.' I went 'Okay, yeah, sure'. I noticed a striking resemblance to myself right there," Bateson recalls, with a grin. "It was the *look* of that first game. Very kind of film noir, long shadows, like The Third Man. My favourite film is Blade Runner, and it had that kind of Blade Runner look. So I gave it a crack."

In a fitting parallel to Kyd's work on the identity of that first Hitman game, Bateson had enormous creative freedom. To the best of his recollection, he wasn't directed during that first session. The role wasn't casually handed to him – he still had to audition – but the character that came forth was his. He spoke as he felt Agent 47 should speak, and clearly, he nailed it. He won the role in 1999, and has been performing it ever since.

Agent 47 is necessarily a cold and calculated individual, but Bateson feels powerfully connected to him in a way that charges his performance. "I truly now look upon Agent 47, Tobias Rieper, as a very, very close friend," he confesses. "I feel very protective of him. I feel like I really, *really* know this character. After so many years, both the writers and myself have kind of grown up with this character. So they're writing with a knowledge of how he would say things, and what he would say. And they're also hearing *me*, how I would probably give an interpretation. It's become a kind of synergy of my acting talent and their writing talent, which has just got tighter and tighter."

He was like that when I got here, honest. What? Behind my back? Oh, nothing…

"I TRULY NOW LOOK UPON AGENT 47, TOBIAS RIEPER, AS A VERY, VERY CLOSE FRIEND. I FEEL VERY PROTECTIVE OF HIM."

KILLING IT

Bateson's comment about considering Agent 47 a friend isn't a throwaway line. He looks forward to recording sessions, in a way, as an opportunity to catch up with this friend that he's grown close to. This might sound like an exaggeration, or even PR spin. It makes perfect sense, however, when you consider just how personal his process of settling on his friend's characterisation was.

"As an actor, voice actor or otherwise, I have to approach something from my own background, or some kind of memory, or someone I know. It's got to come from somewhere," he explains. "I moved around a hell of a lot as a kid. I went to nine schools in 12 years of schooling. So I was always the new boy getting the s**t kicked out of him. I always felt on the outside looking in, where everyone knew each other since they were at nursery school. They'd been through each other's *everything*. And I hadn't.

"There was this character who had no history, created in a laboratory. I went, 'Aah, that rings a bell'. It's not *loneliness*. It's *aloneness*. I wasn't unhappy as a kid, but I had a lot of time to myself, because I was on the outside looking in. So I use *that* to resonate. In a way, I would say, Agent 47's a bit like Frankenstein's Monster. Who am I? Who created me, what is this

"Contracts was an inspiring project. It went super-dark," says Kyd.

Photo: Kim Matthäi Leland

Fortunately, Agent 47 is no angel, and gets to keep his suit on in Blood Money's Club Heaven.

thing called emotion? I kind of tried to paint the lines in a way which had a slight… not *sadness*; not even melancholy. It was just something haunting. And then I heard Jesper's *music*, which haunted the crap out of me in a perfect way."

"Especially on Contracts," says Kyd, "I worked a lot on scoring the game with an internal viewpoint. So it felt like the kind of music that Agent 47 would be, I don't know if you can say listening to, but would be *feeling*. How is he feeling? Of course, with Hitman 2 and Hitman: Blood Money, there was all this world travelling happening, so you had to score the different scenarios and the different locations. But even so, in those levels, there is this music designed to come in and be completely interior to how 47 is feeling and how calm he is. Inspired by David's voice, it's this super calmness, that you just are not going to fail. And that failure is not even an option.

"A track like Apocalypse from Hitman: Blood Money, for example, is this big, orchestral, opera-inspired thing, but at the same time it has this really relentless drive, where you just keep going. It's repetitive and predictable. […] It's just like 47. He knows what he's doing. The music just keeps building and building, but it never goes… explosion! It very much just goes on like this, very much like David's voice."

BLOOD BROTHERS

Although Kyd and Bateson worked independently of one another, it's clear that they both decided, from day one, that there was much more to Agent 47 than the serene, calculated, impeccably suited exterior, and this is why their work aligns so well ("Can two ideas occur at the same time in two different places in the world?" muses Bateson, as he wonders if his performance would have differed at all had he heard Kyd's music prior to recording his lines). Indeed, Kyd is keen to point out that his music is very much full of life.

"The music never gets cold. That was one of the things that I thought was really important. It's more operatic than anything, because I think Agent 47 is… maybe ambitious is not the right word, but he can do anything. I literally believe he can accomplish anything if he sets his mind to it. He's so calculated. But that doesn't mean cold, that just means the music can really be almost unlimited in its creativity, so long as it stays within the world, of course. There's no limit to what 47 can achieve, and I feel the same way about the music."

"IT FELT LIKE THE KIND OF MUSIC THAT AGENT 47 WOULD BE, I DON'T KNOW IF YOU CAN SAY LISTENING TO, BUT WOULD BE FEELING."

Intentionally or otherwise, the 'aloneness' of Agent 47 that Bateson identified earlier bleeds into the recording process. He's ordinarily brought in to perform his part fairly late in development, and records lines by himself. Even the scenes themselves are isolated, in that it wasn't until Hitman III that Bateson was presented with a complete script for the entire game. Not knowing what will happen next, however, is his preferred way of working.

"Several times," Bateman explains, "they said 'and in the next scene…' and I said 'No, no, no!' I don't want to know what's going to happen. I just need to know what's happened before. Put this line in context of what's gone before, and that's all I want to know. To keep it as real as possible. […] I liked the episodic thing. I didn't want to know what was going to happen in the next level. As the recording process has got longer and longer, which is a good thing, we'll do one level at a time, and then meet up again, six to eight weeks later roughly, to do pickups. Then record the next level. And I love that, because it also became an adventure for me. Where are we going this week? Oh, we're going to Japan. Where are we going next week? We're going to Bangkok. Fantastic, can't wait."

If you want to bask in the world of Hitman without the pressure of assassination attempts, you can pre-order vinyl copies of Jesper Kyd's Hitman: Contracts and Hitman: Blood Money soundtracks from lacedrecords.com now, with orders due to ship in November.

Kyd explains, "I was like, let's mix the orchestra with the electronics for Blood Money."

Photo: Joanna Gałuszka

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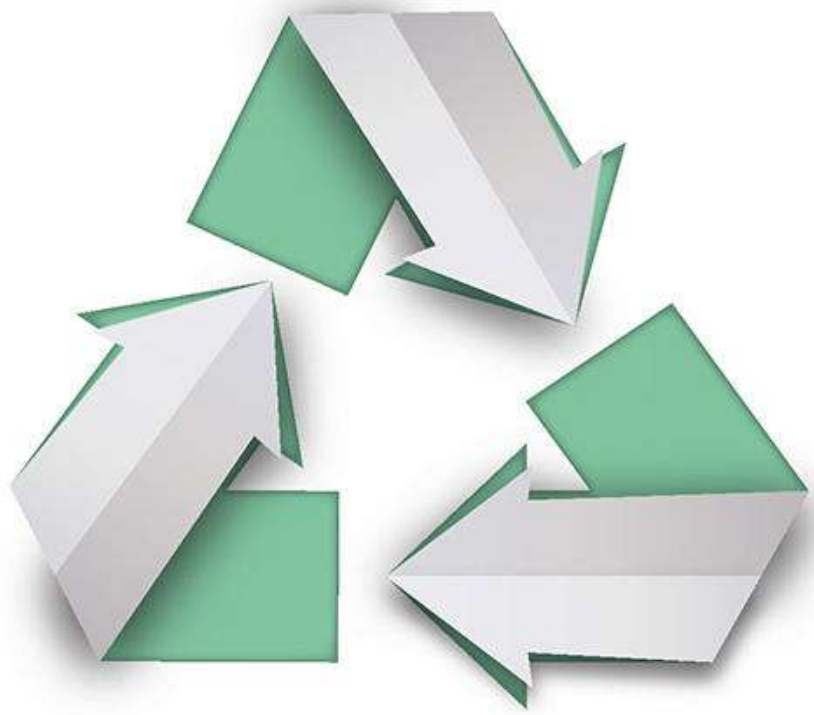

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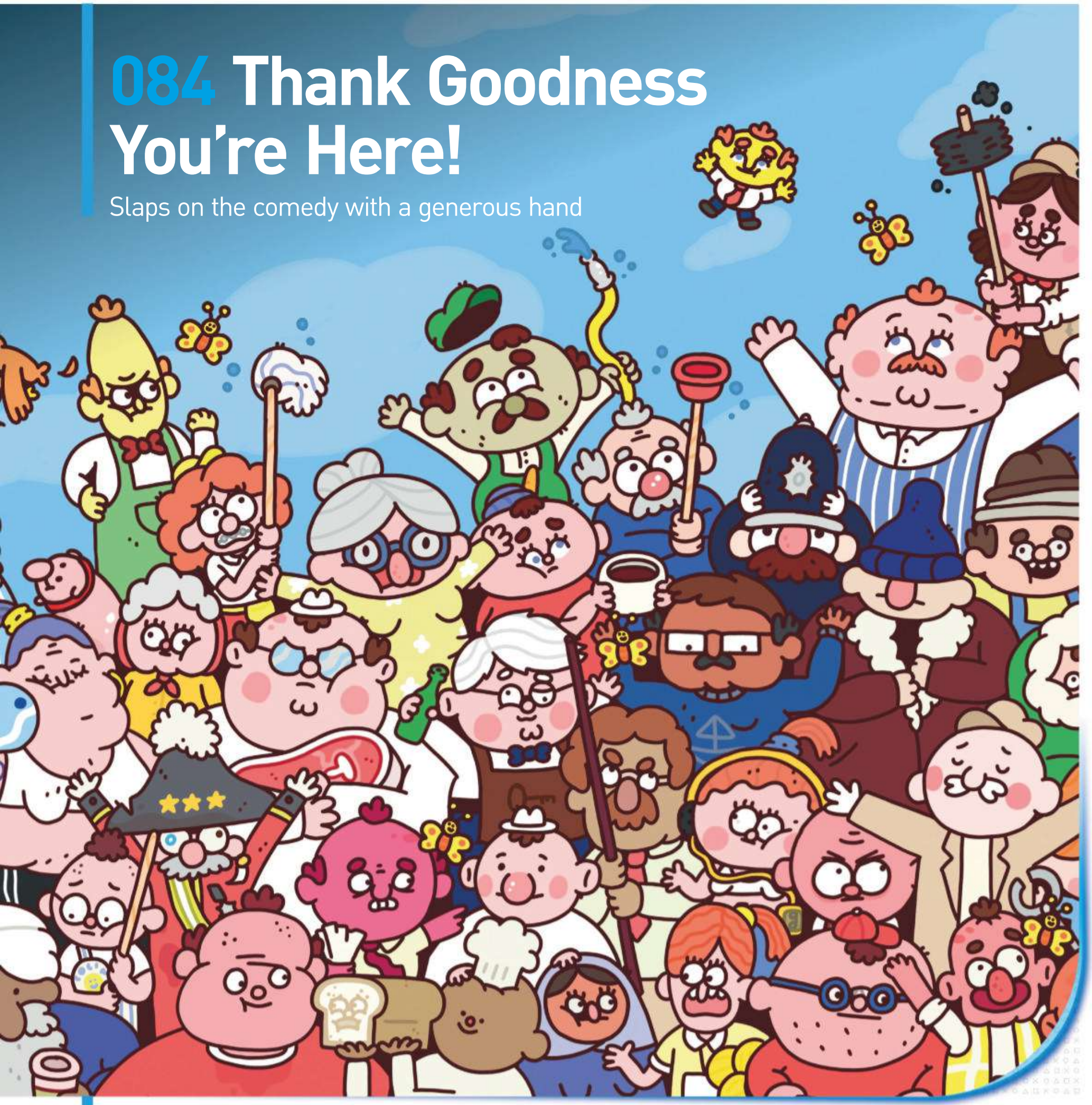
Reviews

"SOME OF THE BEST FIGHTS WE'VE SEEN IN FFXIV."

076 Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail

084 Thank Goodness You're Here!

Slaps on the comedy with a generous hand



HIGHLIGHTS

KUNITSU-GAMI: PATH OF THE GODDESS 080 | MONSTER TRAIN 082 | FLINTLOCK: THE SIEGE OF DAWN 083
DARKEST DUNGEON II 086 | FLOCK 088 | EXHAUSTED MAN 089 | THE STAR NAMED EOS 089 | LET'S SCHOOL 090
UNTIL THEN 092 | CYGNI: ALL GUNS BLAZING 094 | DEMON SLAYER -KIMETSU NO YAIBA- SWEEP THE BOARD! 095

Final Fantasy XIV: Dawntrail

Family matters on this new continent

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £36.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Square Enix
PLAYERS MMORPG
LENGTH 40 hrs (main story; hundreds more content)
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable HUD and controls; supports mouse and keyboard; UI scaling; customisable highlights and targeting; auto run; adjustable camera speed

After saving the planet in previous expansion Endwalker, your Warrior Of Light is in need of a break and a lower-stakes adventure. Enter Wuk Lamat with an invitation to join her crew and help her win the throne and title of Dawnservant over in her home nation of Tural. It's a relatively unexplored continent by Eorzean standards; few have travelled across the 'Salt' to get there so there's a lot of potential for new experiences and a palpable sense of somewhere unknown that's ripe for exploring.

The smooth sailing ends once you arrive, as you become embroiled in a complicated family matter. Current Dawnservant Gulool Ja Ja wants to retire and leave the throne either to one of his three kids (two of whom are adopted), or to a fourth unrelated contender, Bakool Ja Ja – who, like Gulool, is a two-headed lizard-like Mamool Ja. Yet none of those up for succession are ready for rule. To try to prepare them for the task, Gulool has set up a competition that will see all of the claimants travelling across Tural to various settlements and completing challenges to test their worth.

COW STRIFE

Rather than your story, Dawntrail feels very much like Wuk Lamat's – you're just along for the ride (and to give moral support) as she navigates her insecurities regarding her siblings' successes, while learning to connect with the people she wants to rule. Travelling across the different zones, from rainforests to sacred mountain peaks, really does feel like an adventure thanks to some amazing world design, but the story that guides you through it all doesn't always match up. While Wuk Lamat is headstrong and earnest, her schtick

Black Cat is already one of FFXIV's best bosses, and is just the *start* of the Arcadion series.

Lv99 Ambrose the Undeparted
Psychokinesis
Elenora Labella
«Goddess of Magic»
Olinda Aysen
Elenora Labella
«Half-boiled Heroine»
Celshaded Dreams
Lalafi Quack
400
Ambrose the Undeparted
Psychokinesis
Olinda Aysen: Twintania obtains a quickarm materia XI.
Cahciua: I see... This is where they researched the use of feral souls!
Origenics Security: Researcher evacuation complete! Release all test subjects!
Elenora Labella: Alpha obtains an Origenics choker of fending.
You cast your lot for the Origenics ring of fending.
Elenora Labella: Alpha obtains an Origenics ring of fending.
Cahciua: This is too cruel.
Lalafi Quack: Shiva obtains a piety materia XII.
Olinda Aysen: Twintania obtains a battledance materia XII.
Cahciua: It's quiet. Too quiet...
The enhancement testing grounds will be sealed off in 15 seconds!
Ambrose the Undeparted: Filthy rebels! You will not reach the king!
The enhancement testing grounds is sealed off!
Ambrose the Undeparted: My psychokinesis will bring you to your knees!
The nearby cages are under strain from psychokinesis!
Ambrose the Undeparted: Forming directional gravity field!
Ambrose the Undeparted: Stubborn vermin... I will deal with you yet!
Party
Battle
Event

1 As ever, the HUD is extremely customisable. The clutter can offer vital information, or, if you prefer, you can do more with less. 2 From dungeons to Tural itself, the visual design is impeccable (and is accompanied by a huge graphical overhaul). 3 Pictomancer and Viper may both be new DPS jobs, but they feel totally unique.

starts to get repetitive. Her wanting people to come together to work out their differences is a lovely sentiment, truly, but it loses its strength when it needs to be repeated so often.

The mid-game also takes a weird cowboy-styled sojourn into the Wild West for a couple of baffling hours. Shaaloani looks amazing – full of red rocks, saloons, and Cerulean (*cough*oil*cough*) rigs pumping the riches from underground, it feels like a real desert. Even the NPCs have a quiet sense of place and industry. However, the main story thread takes you through some serious Spaghetti Western clichés that feel so out of place we have to laugh at the absurdity. Thankfully the visit is brief and it's all to lull you into a false sense of security before the real meat of the story hits you like a rampaging Behemoth.

The last third of Dawntrail is where all of its best bits lie; it's full of real danger, loss, and the kind of Easter eggs that will make FFIX fans giddy. While we won't go into details (no spoilers!), we will tell you it sets up a very exciting future for the rest of FFXIV and where we'll potentially be going next. The journey to get to this point may have been uneven, but the main story does come together by the end of its 40-ish-hour run time.

The last third is full of real danger, loss, and Easter eggs that will make FFIX fans dizzy.

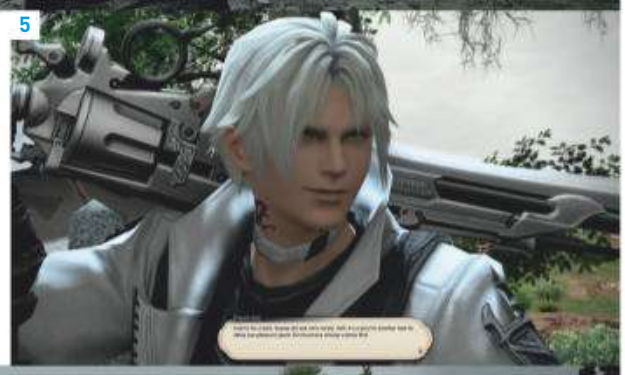
RAID NIGHT

While the story has a lot of bumps, the fights in Dawntrail are some of the best we've seen in FFXIV. The first dungeon feels like business as usual, but soon the bosses start throwing loads of new mechanics at you that will have you practically dancing around stages as you throw fists at them. You now need to weave around obstacles as you avoid attacks and pay close attention to arena edges to predict where things are going to come from. It's really kicked the challenge up a few notches, and yet everything is still completely readable – you still see the familiar attack markers FFXIV has spent the last five expansions teaching you, but now the developers have started playing with them to keep you on your toes. Healers, in particular, will feel the shift as you need to get more involved if you're to keep all of your teammates standing.

The new eight-person raid series, The Arcadion, is a particular highlight. It's a futuristic fighting competition organised in order to boost civilian morale; you need to scrap through four wrestling-themed boss fights while being hurled across the fighting ring, inundated with toxic love poisons, or avoiding a clothesline charge from a man with a bomb for a torso. Every fight is playfully imaginative and as The Arcadion is basically a Final Fantasy WWE the whole thing thrives on vivid spectacle. It's the best raid series in the entire game.

PICTURE THIS

Underpinning all of that battle excellence is the raised level cap of 100, meaning every Job has additional skills to learn. On top of that, two more Jobs have been added. The dual-wielding Viper feels faster than our thumbs can manage at first, but



4 How To Become A Gillionare In Ten Easy Steps. **5** Thancred and other fan favourites return. **6** Jump into the expansion during the launch window and fights in the overworld are humorously swarmed by players.

has a steady rhythm that's easy to get to grips with. Meanwhile Pictomancer sees you building up parts of paintings before unleashing them as powerful spells. It's a wild take on magic that takes a while to get your head around but the strokes are so much fun once you get going.

Dawntrail might be the start of a new adventure for the Warrior Of Light and pals but it is not somewhere for new players to start. The story still rests on a lot of the the threads that have come before, so if you had hoped to jump in at Dawntrail and level-boost your way past the earlier bits you're out of luck. You'll need to start from the beginning and get yourself through hundreds of hours of questing before you can step onto the shores of Tuliyollal, but trust us, the journey to get there is worth it. Plus with the graphical update, all story dungeons now playable solo, and the free trial being extended to level 70 it's easier than ever to get stuck in.

Despite the issues with the narrative, the continent of Tural is so mesmerising it makes dealing with the low moments worth it. Each settlement you visit has its own history and traditions that make the world richer, and the graphical update makes the dense jungles and picturesque scenery shine on PS5. Ultimately you'll be spending most of your time in Dawntrail post-story, doing raids or hunting down nuggets of lore scattered across the land.

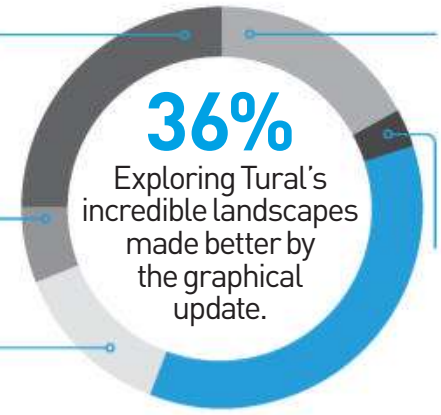
The story may not compare to previous expansions, but we're still hankering to log back in to get another taste of Tural.

The main story has blips, but Tural is a wonderful world to explore and, importantly, creates a solid foundation for more FFXIV updates to come. Daniella Lucas

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: FFXIV: DAWNTRAIL



25% Sweating your way through challenging new fight mechanics.

17% Spotting references to other Final Fantasy games.

6% Pausing to cry in the final zone.

3% Regretting outfit choices in major cutscenes.

13% Dealing with unlucky loot rolls.

HOW TO... UNLOCK NEW MOUNTS

The two major new mounts for Dawntrail are an adorable alpaca that you unlock by progressing to the end of the main story and a capybara that requires more effort to acquire. You'll need to wait for a boss fate to spawn in Shaaloani and collect 12 scales to trade in.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

BAKOOL JA JA
Rival? Friend? Lover? With two heads he can be whoever you want him to be.

WUK LAMAT
Endlessly optimistic and brave, the whole of Dawntrail is her show.

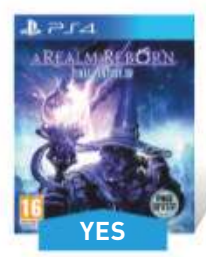
ERENVILLE
The perfect guide for your journey through the gorgeous wilderness of Tural.

LOVING/HATING

BRAWL THAT AND MORE
The fight mechanics have been toughened up for Dawntrail making for some fun challenges without going too hard.

OLD COWBOY HAT
The Wild West area Shaaloani looks amazing, but its story is filled with disappointing and hackneyed story tropes.

IS IT BETTER THAN?



The start of the story, A Realm Reborn, is starting to show its age now and feels slow by comparison.

This fresh start can't beat Endwalker's conclusion of the Zodiark and Hydaelyn storyline.

Second expansion Stormblood's split story is on level pegging with DT, but Tural offers more.

Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess

She'll be coming down the mountain

What do tower defence, hack-and-slash, and traditional Japanese dance theatre have in common? The answer: they're all core to Kunitsu-Gami, one of the freshest games we've played since, well, all four of the Capcom Five [*Don't ask* – ed]. It's set entirely on a mountain that's host to a spiritual invasion; you play as spirit warrior Soh who must protect barrier-maiden Yoshiro as she cleanses its torii gates.

Almost round-like, each level starts during the day, giving you time to set things up and get Yoshiro moving. The yokai, or Seethe, come out at night, and you must defend her from assault until dawn – when it starts all over again. Soh's handy with a blade, but you can enlist cleansed villagers for battle and command them to tackle tasks around the map. Cop it, and they'll keep fighting while you respawn, but if Yoshiro dies, it's all over.

Handily, the villagers are quite effective, meaning whether you decide to take the front line and leave them to defend, vice versa, or somewhere in between, they're good at holding their own. On top of that, the ease with which you can change their classes allows for lots of variation in setup depending on the battle – you're able to mix and match woodcutters, shamans, marksmen, and many more.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £39.99
ETA Out now
PUB Capcom
DEV Capcom
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 25+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Speaker name display; closed captions; adjustable subtitle size, subtitle background, subtitle colour, highlight colour, minimap radar colour, and restricted icon colour

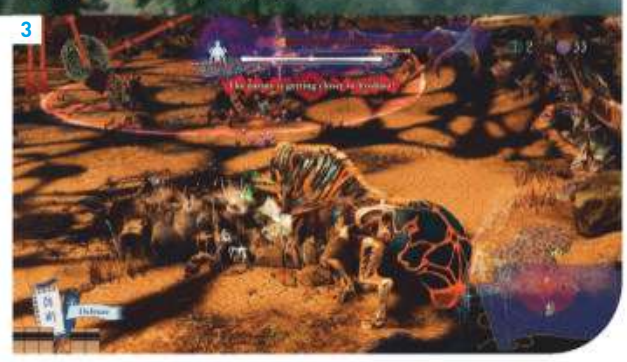
VILLAGE PEOPLE

Wonderfully, each level adds new solutions as well as new complexities. Flying enemies, for instance, might be the bane of your nightly battles early on, but once you're able to start upgrading Soh's abilities, you can swiftly see to them with a bow of your own and stop feeling quite so useless down on the ground. Unlockable quality-of-life features such as the ability to tell Yoshiro to stop moving from a distance might also be invaluable, especially once you begin to get more options to power the dancing maiden up when she parks on certain spots.

Even the gameplay loop changes to keep things from becoming tedious. Sometimes you'll have to rely more heavily on the villagers for a special encounter, fight entirely on the water, or light up a path through a cave (and much, much more). And that's not to mention plenty of boss fights that bring combat to the fore. But it never strays from its path into the realm of feeling gimmicky for the sake of it.

SWORD DANCER

For an experimental title, no expense has been spared; Kunitsu-Gami is filled to the brim with care and attention to detail. The traditional Japanese aesthetics are conveyed in an artisanal style more commonly



1 Upgrades will sometimes have visible effects on the class, adding even more shine and frills to the gorgeous outfits. 2 It's a long way down and this is just the beginning. 3 Fights with big bosses will put Soh's skills to the test.

found in tabletop dioramas than CGI, making for some truly enchanting visuals both in the gnarly horror of the defilement and the beauty of its purification. The sound design is also impeccable, from the eerie chants of some enemies to the cheers of the villagers at sunrise that punctuate its wordless story. And it's all underpinned by a lovely soundtrack with some standout boss music.

On top of this, it's got a lot of heart for a game with very little dialogue. It's hard not to feel protective of Yoshiro or grateful for the carpenter who is with you both all the way. Despite the crowd being different at every mountain-descent pit stop, the villagers all have names and even biographies you can find in the menu, allowing you to learn about the people behind the sea of masks.

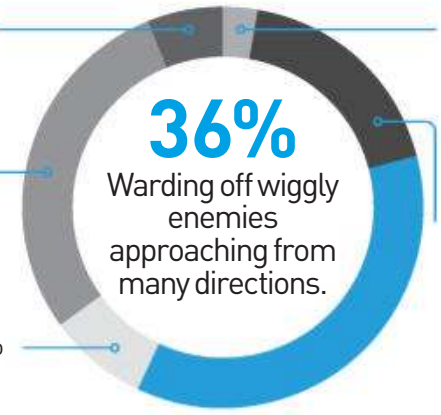
That feeling of care is why Kunitsu-Gami's developers can get away with giving you a sea of collectibles as your primary rewards. Collecting Ema plaques where you can see the models and read about class types, monsters, and even the everyday animals is an enjoyable payoff for rebuilding sections of each base. Similarly, previous levels have optional objectives to achieve, making replaying them a worthy endeavour both for the rewards and for the satisfaction of completion. It's a good excuse to go back to early stages with some of your late-game villagers too, although don't let that fool you into thinking it's going to be a walk in the park!

A strikingly beautiful experience that keeps all things in balance. Its successful simplicity and gorgeous visuals give Kunitsu-Gami a timeless quality. **Max Williams**

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: KUNITSU-GAMI: POTG


36%
Warding off wiggly enemies approaching from many directions.
6% Trying not to jump when the controller asks for help.
29% Swish-swishing the big stick.
8% Having a bop to the boss music.
3% Both marvelling at and envying the hyper-realistic sweets you can give to Yoshiro.
18% Affectionately attacking the wildlife for its own good.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

ASCETIC
They buy valuable extra seconds to take out enemies with their slowdown spells.

WOODCUTTER
No, there's no tree chopping here – they use their axes to cut down Seethe instead.

ARCHER
Your best friend until you get your own bow, and often still afterwards.

STATPACK

12
Roles you can assign to the townspeople you've cleansed and recruited for their help in battle when night falls and the Seethe attack.

50
Musubi for the most expensive upgrade in the game, which unlocks an extra Tsuba Guard slot for Soh. It's worth the price, though.

60
Information-packed Ema plaques to collect. They're all hung on a nice display you can find in the base for perusal at your leisure.

HOW TO... UNLOCK SWEETS

Some villages have a building that unlocks a new type of sweet on completion. This usually takes four or five villagers with wooden planks to finish. You'll have to direct them to the wood around town and it will take beating two stages to complete, whereas most only take one.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Defeat 100 Seethe by using other Seethe attacks and see how they like it.

SILVER
Everybody gets some attention and a fair share of the Musubi for a full upgrade.

GOLD
Beat all boss fights up to the Great Shrine Passage within a total of 20 minutes for this.

The best bouts make for a chaotic screen, but Monster Train's onslaught of strategic options is exactly why it's so compelling.

Monster Train

And we thought *our* commute was hell

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £19.99
ETA Out now
PUB Good Shepherd Entertainment
DEV Shiny Shoe
PLAYERS 1, online multiplayer modes and features
LENGTH About 1 hr per run
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable game speed; combat preview; tip and lore tooltips on/off; static battle background option; camera shake on/off; colourblind mode for Deuteranopia; adjustable UI size

Hell has frozen over. After spending many hours with this deck builder on other platforms, Team PLAY are ready for this roguelike to pull into the Play-Station. The last pyre of Hell's heart blazes still, and you're tasked with ferrying it to safety across the now-frozen wastes to where it can reignite the realm. Naturally, the feather-brained no-fun squad wants to run that plan off the tracks.

What follows are two main phases: first, trundling through an apocalyptic winter aboard the titular locomotive, tearing open booster packs, upgrading units at friendly moggy vendors, and scooping up artefacts to gain a double-edged, uh, edge in future sieges. Second, putting your cards on the foldout table for a turn-based take on tower defence.

Card-based bouts against heaven's hordes see you placing units across three floors, putting up a wall of horns between waves of winged wimps and your pyre perched above. If all of your friendlies fall, the pyre itself can finish off weaker foes – but it's the end of the line if the pyre shatters.

This is far from a dreary commute, with snappy, well-paced runs respecting your time. This is in part thanks to touches such as a fast-forward on L1, plus concise tooltips ready to remind you of your keyword capabilities.

RUSH HOUR

You hit the tracks with two starter decks every run, a loadout that encourages you to experiment with your strategy every time you leave the station. The basic-but-beefy Hellhorned and the plant-life-on-the-defensive Awoken starter decks offer a balanced introduction to life on the rails, but even these freebies sequester satisfying strategic depths that demonstrate Monster Train's commitment to teaching you the meaning of the word 'synergy.'

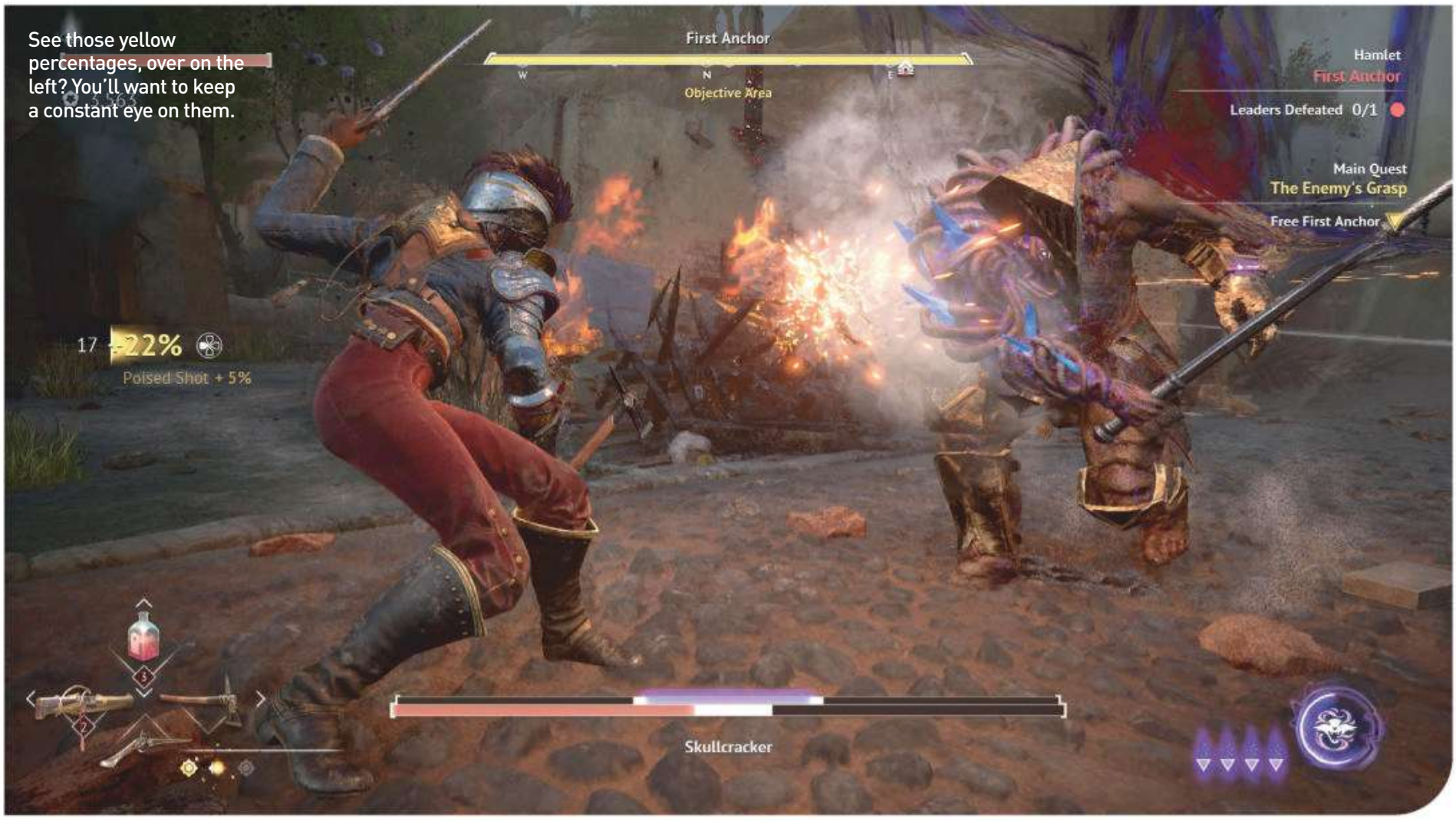
You hit the tracks with two starter decks, a loadout that encourages you to experiment.

For instance, the Awoken's initial champion is a living wall called The Sentient. You can specialise your champion in a few different ways each run, but The Sentient's healing starter card, Restore, coupled with the Rejuvenate ability, lets them dish out damage every time they heal. Backing up this front line defence with a fighter boasting Incant, a card effect that can buff a unit every time you sling a spell onto the field, is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to smart card plays to uncover.

Plumbing these mechanical depths is its own reward, but plucking an awful lot of angels out of the sky unlocks a total of six starter decks. These include The Last Divinity DLC-exclusive Wurmkin and the standout Umbra. The latter sees you juggle a fistful of cards like someone hit you with an Uno reverse, and features soot sprite-like units dying to be gobbled up so they can buff your friendlies – it's Monster Train at its hectic best.

Punchy runs respect your time, and a willingness to let you throw your cards at the wall to see what sticks makes each fresh one worth the ticket to ride. **Jess Kinghorn**

9
PLAY



Flintlock: The Siege Of Dawn

Face god(s) and walk backwards into hell

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Kepler Interactive
DEV A44
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10-15 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Customisable UI colours; blood effects on/off; adjustable text size and background opacity

An axe in one hand, a pistol in the other, a small furry god at heel who batters foes with sorcery – Flintlock's Nor Vanek isn't much of a believer in 'character classes'. Open the upgrade menu with its three skill trees and you'll notice their upper branches are entwined, with the most powerful abilities at their crossover points, encouraging you to spread your points around. Melee *and* magic *and* munitions? Go on, Nor, treat yourself to the lot.

Refusing to lock off any abilities behind character customisation is a great way to ensure combat never gets old, across the dozen or so hours it'll take you to chew through the undead hordes and reach their godly masters. One minute you're lining up sun-bleached skulls in the scope of your rifle, the game doing a nearly-convincing impression of Sniper Elite's Zombie Army spinoffs. (Or, if that sounds too subtle for you, you can simply blow them apart with a pirate-ship-sized cannon.) A couple of teleport hops later and you're right up in their rotting faces, dodge-rolling and parrying attacks and generally being reminded why Flintlock describes itself as a 'soulslite'.

WALKING THE GOD

In other words, it's a game of dying and respawning at bonfires and fighting your way back to your own corpse and where you left off, all that good stuff. But one where you don't do *quite* as much of the dying as you would in, say, a FromSoftware game. There is a harder difficulty setting available, if you'd like your bottom more thoroughly spanked (and a Story one, if you'd rather just sit on it and relax) but played at that level, the combat systems start to creak a little, the camera and targeting often struggling to keep up with all those options at your disposal.

Ultimately this isn't a game that's designed to particularly test your mastery of combat or force you to dig around in stat-heavy menus crafting the perfect build – why bother specialising when you can have it all? But there is self-imposed challenge to be found, in the brilliant addition of a combo counter that multiplies your XP with every fresh attack as it connects. You can manually cash in at any moment, banking your current reward before you take a hit and it resets, but... well, what are you, chicken? Your brain's always firing off these little calculations, which a cynic might suggest is a handy distraction from the rougher edges of the fights themselves. But it's always thrilling to wager against your own abilities – and if you are going to bet on someone in a fight, the person with the axe, gun, and pet god probably isn't a bad shout.

Refusing to lock off any abilities behind character customisation ensures combat never gets old.

A lighter take on the soulslike formula that's generous with its toys – just don't expect them to be crafted with the godlike precision of FromSoftware's classics. **Alex Spencer**

7 PLAY

The whole game has this wonderful 'comic strip come to life' look, not just the cutscenes.

Thank Goodness You're Here!

Take a victory slap Coal Supper, thou have earned it

Oh no, not *another* game where you play as a tiny travelling salesman who defies the laws of physics. You know the drill: lots of slapping, a constant stream of jokes, talking animals, terrifyingly well-trained seagulls, a statue in the town square of somebody called 'Dr Bumbum', and so on. When will we get something original?! At least this one is hilarious.

Many games are designed to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, meaning the level of Yorkshire pride on display here is both surprising and delightful. Most characters speak with a Yorkshire accent, and you even have the option of whether or not to embrace the dialect in the menus (it's the difference between having 'Options' and 'Faff'). The town of Barnsworth is fictional, but the intro and title screen use archive footage of Barnsley in (we think) the 1970s. The whole experience is so Northern – specifically, so *Yorkshire* – that we wonder what our gaming cousins in America will make of it.

Coal Supper cheerily describes this as a 'slapformer'. Considering the fact that there are just two buttons to master during play – Jump and Slap – we can't argue. Viewing Thank Goodness You're Here! through this lens, however, accurate and unique as it is, is rather reductive. The heart and soul of this game is comedy.

INFO

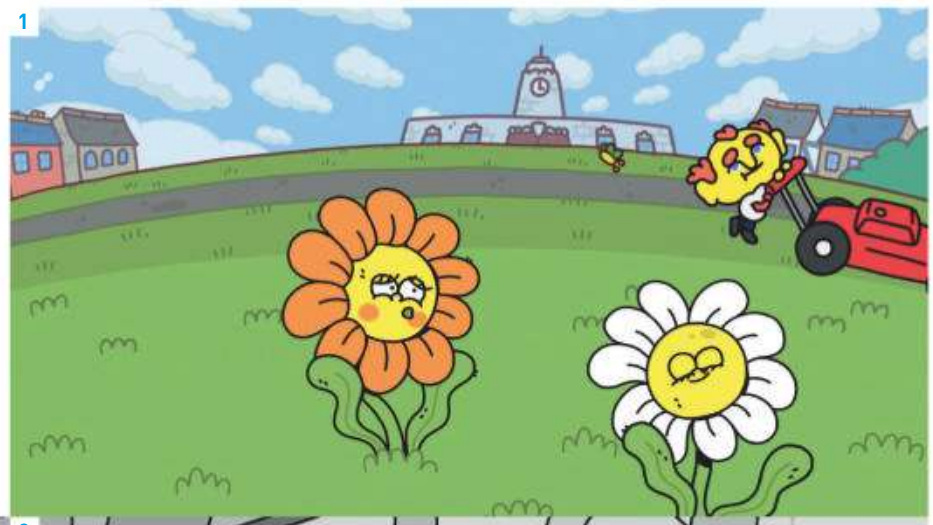
FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £14.99
ETA Out now
PUB Panic
DEV Coal Supper
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Dialect or plain English for menus; subtitles on/off; adjustable subtitle size; vibration on/off

OLD YORK, OLD YORK

TGYH! is written and presented more like a standup comedy routine than a game. There's a plot, but only really in the way that many standup sets have an overarching theme. Jokes are hurled at you at a gatling-gun rate, some rapid-fire one-liners, some short tales. There are even running jokes. This is a game that is talking to you constantly, with just one goal: to make you laugh.

This is why play is disarmingly simple. You're mostly just running and jumping around, slapping things when the occasion arises. But you might be running to push a tin of Peans ("not quite peas, not quite beans, but something inbetweens") into a shopping trolley pushed by an arm stretching a mile away from its owner. You could be jumping into a chimney to flood somebody's living room with soot. You might be slapping a gigantic pair of bum cheeks, or a toaster, or a snail, or a postbox. It's all in service of the comedy, which hits a bullseye almost every single time.

It's not intended for little'uns – there are rare instances of swearing for comic effect, and a sprinkling of double entendres that rather stretch the definition of the word 'double' – but it's always



1 Yes, that's a lawnmower. Yes, those are sentient flowers. Yes, he's going to do it.
2 Sometimes you're as big as a cat, sometimes significantly smaller.
3 If you resist the urge to slap these cheeks, we admire you.

about being funny, not merely shocking or crass. The humour bounces from the absurd to the surreal to the childish and back again, never missing a beat. Coal Supper clearly made a deliberate decision to include several people with established careers in the world of comedy in the cast, the most recognisable of whom for most people will be Matt Berry.

BERRY GOOD INDEED

Barnsworth is pretty small. In gameplay terms, this means you'll essentially be doing laps of it during your short but sweet time there. Pace is crucial to the experience, meaning that it's important your little legs keep moving you on to the next gag with no interruptions, and this is where TGYH! stumbles on rare but unfortunate occasions. Areas sometimes have more than one exit, with one or more subtly blocked to help point you in the right direction when needed. Nonetheless, there are two or three times when we struggle to work out where to go next, and need a minute or two before we hit the 'Oh yeah, right' moment.

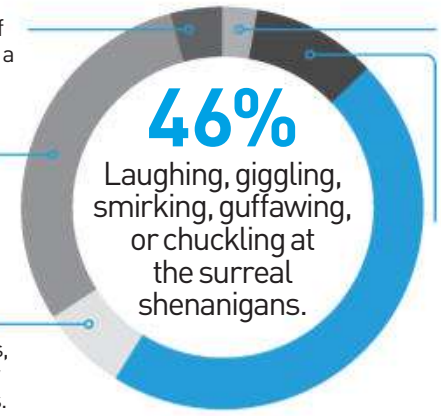
This is incredibly easy to forgive, however, as we always know that whatever is coming next will be worth it. As gloriously silly as it often is, it's worth recognising that TGYH! challenges commonly held ideas of what games are 'allowed' to do or be. It's one long comedy routine, where the laughs take priority over everything else – and there's nothing wrong with that.

This is a perfect purchase if, one might say, thou fancy a reet good laff. Perfectly judged absurdist comedy delivered via surreal shenanigans; we love it. **Luke Kemp**

9 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: TGYH!



4% Asking yourself 'Does this count as a puzzle?' before deciding 'Nah'.

30% Slapping. Slapping what? Slapping anything and everything you see, relentlessly.

7% Finding one of the saucier jokes, and finding it funny rather than tedious.

3% Searching for the way to the next skit, anticipating the nonsense to come.

10% Discovering a new way someone or something reacts to being slapped.

HOW TO... RETRIEVE JASPER'S HAMMER

At one point, you need to jump into a bait box in order to get at a hammer that's lying at the bottom of the river. The first time around, this simple task confused us for an embarrassing amount of time before we realised we needed to hold the Slap button to drag the tool back up with us...

FRIENDS & ENIEMIES

BIG RON
Purveyor of Big Ron's Big Pies. Jolly. Likes his pies to be comically large.

TINY TOM
The brains behind Tiny Tom's Tiny Pies. Surly. He hates big pies with a passion.

ROG
Owner of Rog's Veg Hole. Has unresolved issues with his big pointy head.

STATPACK

01
Other game from Coal Supper; the even stranger, even shorter The Good Time Garden on PC. It's free, and doesn't need high specs, if you fancy it.

18
Inches or more is the length of the marrow in the title song, which dates from the 1950s. Oh, what a beauty, as the lyrics declare, indeed.

01
Song written especially for the game, which – of course – comes at the end. It riffs on the relentless parade of tasks thrown at you.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Keep an eye out for Nick's Bricks, and slap that wall when it looks a bit damaged...

BRONZE
Slap every postbox in town, spilling their contents onto the ground, for this.

GOLD
Complete the game. The name of the trophy doesn't match how you'll feel.

Damage-over-time conditions stack, so let loose for major intoxication.

Darkest Dungeon II

The fire fades

Friendship established, our Leper tank is comforted when our Grave Robber does *something* to enemy corpses to slurp up HP, reducing his all-important stress meter. But as the flame on our stagecoach begins to peter out, our highly strung Plague Doctor squabbles with the Jester, after which we're jumped by occultists and ultimately done in.

You'll be watching that stagecoach trundle along plenty in Darkest Dungeon II, which retools the first game's dungeon delving into a more standard roguelike approach. Your party's interactions, both positive and negative, are a bright spot – but cameraderie, like the fading flame in this Lovecraft-inspired nightmare world, struggles against the dark.

Everything is out to get you on your quest to the Mountain across multiple routes that grow steadily tougher. Nodes on the road can offer some risk/reward choices, from whether to tackle tough battles to simply deciding how to deal with survivors. The paths between can also rock the coach with more fights, rough patches that'll put your transport through its paces, even risking an ambush in the event of a breakdown, or debuffs that make the ultimate boss stronger. Often, only some of this is charted on the map, leaving you to weigh up the risk of taking a diversion against the advantage of gaining knowledge of another path.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £32.49
ETA Out now
PUB Red Hook Studios
DEV Red Hook Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2-4 hrs per run
ACCESSIBILITY Text; some button toggles

Quickly, though, you'll sus out how it works, making choices at forks in the road obvious – especially as the branching paths have a habit of funnelling you down fairly linear routes.

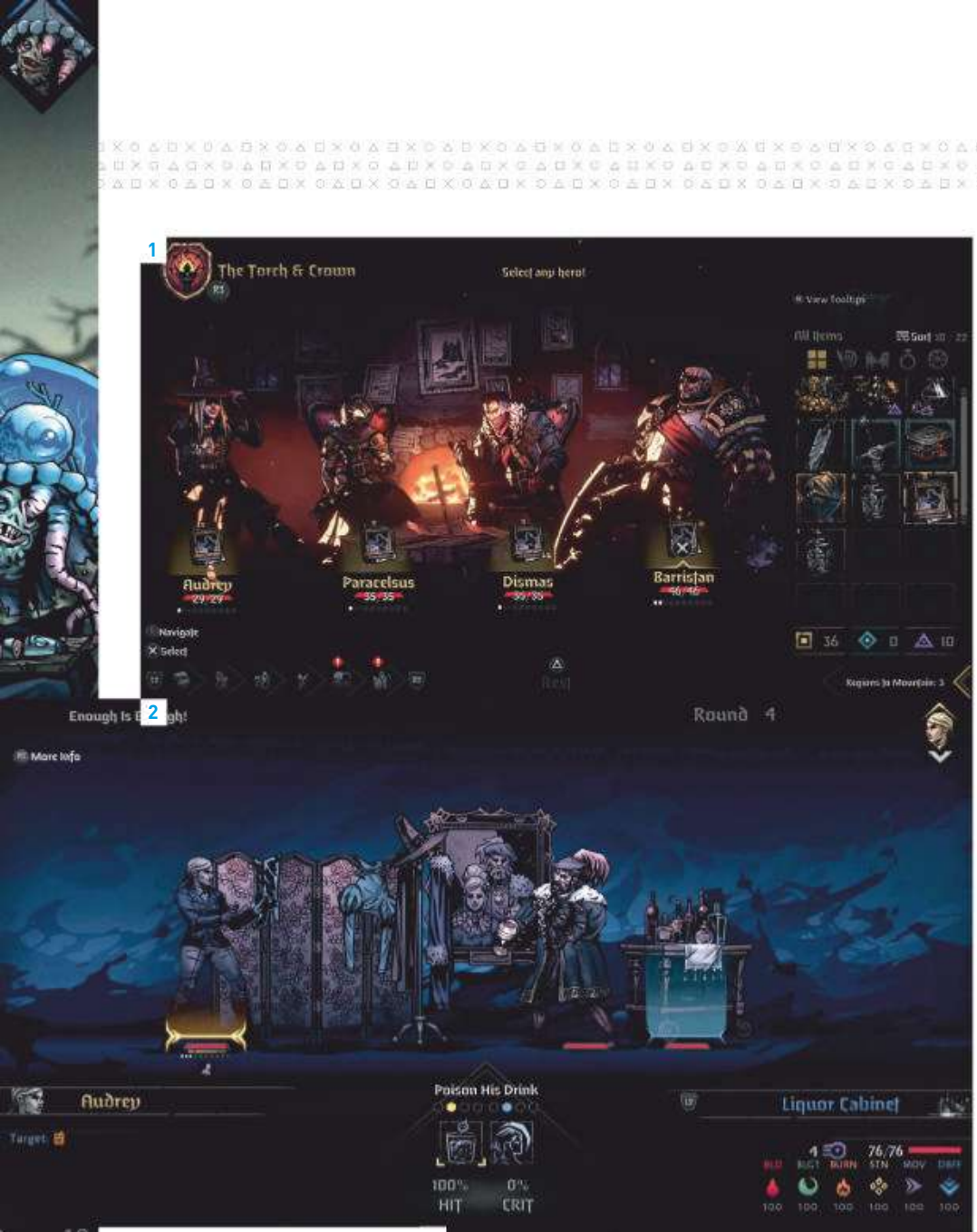
ROUTING OUT

Battles are frequent, and tough at first as your four-person party is batted around by heavy hits and heaps of status effects. Again, you'll soon learn how to tank damage, bounce back with heals, and dish out your own debuffs. As this is a roguelike, you run the same routes a lot, as well as fighting the same battles. While each themed zone offers its own enemies to oppose you, configurations are frequently familiar, meaning you're essentially be repeating the same scraps regularly once you've figured out which strategies you like.

Neat cut-in animations also begin to grate, as do the seconds you spend with minimal control over your coach as it trundles from point to point. A good run can take a few hours to complete (you can quit and continue later, though), and that's mostly down to the game's glacial pace, which doesn't mesh well with the tense tone and down-to-the-wire mechanics in battle.

Variety mostly comes from the frequently random nature of skills. Many fights feel dependent upon checks against whether certain conditions are applied or if attacks hit, meaning whether these familiar

Darkest Dungeon II, despite the promise of risk or reward, feels more like trial and error.



1 A lot of items can only be used at the inn, so make the most of them. **2** Class stories unlock permanent skills, and sometimes tell a tale through mechanics. **3** Keep the stress down with a jangle of the strings. Play Wonderwall!

encounters go your way can feel out of your control.

FRENEMY SIGHTS

Much of Darkest Dungeon II, even after you've spent currency earned through each run to unlock more options, comes down to momentum. As characters gain stress (which can cause them to Meltdown, losing health and camaraderie in fights), it can compound. Negative relationship effects can force you to equip certain moves, which then apply huge debuffs to your party.

Likewise the opposite is true. Once you get used to prioritising good rapport, often by using Inn Items between zones (if you can navigate the extremely clunky PS5 menus – this couldn't have been more obviously designed with PC in mind), you can shred encounters with ease.

That is, until you get all the way to the route's boss and realise that your party isn't built to hit them in the particular way they're meant to be hit. Taken on their own, these puzzle-like boss encounter strategies are well designed, but when it feels like you've wasted hours getting there, it's frustrating. Each route takes a while to get going, making it tough to roll right back into another.

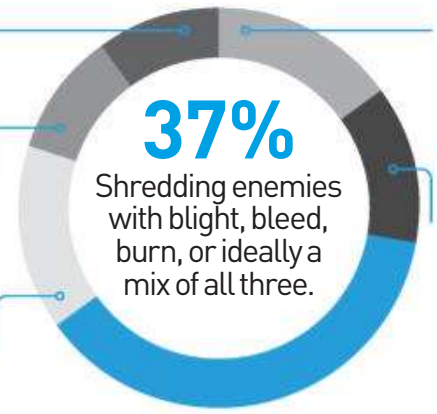
Our favourite roguelikes mesh together random elements with plenty of choice in how to handle a spanner in the works. Darkest Dungeon II, despite the promise of risk or reward, feels more like trial and error – which doesn't work when stretched so needlessly thin.

Though the battle system is refined, the lacklustre structure feels needlessly slow and repetitive. We'd rather play the first one – not a good omen. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

5 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: DARKEST DUNGEON II



10% Getting smashed by a boss fight your team couldn't handle.

10% Rereading tutorial prompts trying to figure out how the game works.

15% Wishing the slow carriage rides would speed up.

15% Watching the same battle animations over and over, wishing they were faster.

13% Playing around with a new class you've unlocked but then going back to your faves.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

MAN-AT-WAR
Able to dash to the front, raise a shield, and de-stress pals, he's a sturdy ally.

PLAGUE DOCTOR
Mixing heals, poison bombs, and a bloody scalpel, you'll want to make friends.

JESTER
Debuffing bladework and high agility pair with ally-buffing guitar work.

SECOND OPINION STRESSED JESSTER

Having sunk many hours into the first game, I was well on board for a sequel – but I wasn't prepared for a horde of inelegantly deployed tool tips and tutorials from the off. This followup brims with bright ideas, such as a stronger narrative and mechanical focus on the interplay between your party members, but these glimmers are lost in the dark of overlong, even more punishing runs. **Jess Kinghorn**

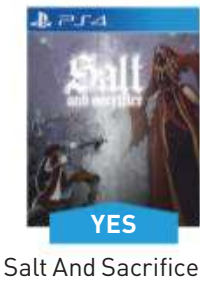
LOVING/HATING

LOVELY JUBBLY
Who doesn't love it when a plan comes together? Play nice and you'll unlock some powerful synergies between pals.

A MENU, SIR?
It's a 'no thanks' from us when they're like this. Trying to navigate these on a pad is more nightmarish than the cultists.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

NO
The first Darkest Dungeon's easier to get into, though also more uniquely challenging.



YES
Salt And Sacrifice is another sequel that overcomplicates what came before, even more than DDII.

NO
The brilliantly moreish Slay The Spire uses cards to create snappier turn-based roguelike action.

Though each critter is a simple creature, we can't fault the straightforward pleasure of flying free with a herd of up to 30 of them.

Flock

Raising the roost

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4

PRICE £15.99

ETA Out now

PUB Annapurna Interactive

DEV Hollow Ponds, Richard Hogg

PLAYERS 1-4 (online)

LENGTH 5+ hrs

ACCESSIBILITY Easy charming option; vibration on/off, creature sing indicators on/off; camera's X and Y axes independently invertable; larger UI text option; cursor always visible option

Birds of a feather… well, you know the rest, though not quite like this. In this easygoing creature collector, you gather an airborne menagerie that looks like a crayon-crazed toddler's scribbles have taken wing. But rather than relying on the bad-vibe genre mainstays of hunting and capturing, you employ a much more charming mechanic to coax critters under your wing.

This indie collaboration is all about the simple pleasure of observing the natural environment around you. With an infectious excitement, your zoologist auntie sends you off across a cloud-covered island to identify every trilling blob you clap eyes upon. Identification involves a simple taxonomy, first asking you to suss out the fauna's family and then the species based on behavioural and visual clues. There's no penalty for getting it wrong, and some of the brief beastie descriptions are a treat to read (for instance, the gormless skyfish is officially described as having a "head empty of thought"). That said, creature behaviour is straightforward and interactions between them are fairly limited – here, the hills are alive only with the sound of trilling.

REELING YOUR BEAK IN

Exploring upon the back of a big birdie, flight is *mostly* frictionless. As your winged companion automatically adjusts the height of your flight path, coasting over clouds and swooping between trees with a squeeze of R2 for speed will leave you in high spirits. Sky-bound area design makes for breezy exploration, though we find our bird tends either to veer towards or away from speed-boosting ruins exactly when we want to do the opposite. You know what they say about working with animals!

By collecting stolen whistles you can teach your big birdie to mimic the warbles of the island's critters. When you deploy this party trick, you can gently encourage the beasts to fly with you for a while, provided you can either catch up with or spot them hiding in the underbrush first. Called 'charming,' this mechanic sees you targeting critters with ⊗, before lining up the reticules to trill at them. Fly either too close or far away as you call, and you risk scaring off your target – it appears even gormless skyfish have a concept of 'personal space' and 'desperation.' While at times finicky to adjust for bigger fish in the sky, it's easy enough to find a spooked quarry again.

> By mimicking their warbles, you can gently encourage the island's critters to fly with you.

Every call is irresistibly imitable – so much so that other members of Team PLAY reassured me that it really was all right if I turned the sound up, and that I didn't need to fill in all the blanks myself. That's what I get for practising my chocobo impression in our open-plan office…

This small-scale creature collector is a breezy flight of fancy offering infectious excitement about the natural world. Pass the binoculars; it's time to touch some grass. **Jess Kinghorn**

7 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 [rev], PS4 **PRICE** £19.99
ETA Out now **PUB** Extra Nice, Playism
DEV Ewoud van der Werf, Nils Slijkerman **PLAYERS** 1

Schim

Jumping at shadows

Ever feel like part of you has gone missing without you realising? Well, that missing piece may just be your schim, a playful little creature that lives in your shadow.

As a schim separated from your human when life drags them down, you must hop from shadow to shadow as you attempt to reconnect with them.[1] A wonderful, striking visual style emphasises the shadows you leap between. There's puzzling to be had, often revolving around pushing ◎ to interact with an object you're within – pinging yourself off a sandwich board, raising a forklift, and so on – but not actually that much. It's generally so frictionless that you don't need to think about it too much, and can enjoy the vibes.[2]

Each level is short, sometimes lasting seconds or a few minutes, which would work better with more variety in the mix. A highlight is a section where your human tries out different jobs, prompting trips to the zoo, the museum, and other places. But a lot of time is spent navigating samey streets without much going on besides uncovering the odd hidden object or waiting for a person to walk past at just the right moment.

For a puzzler like this, some sections are surprisingly freeform when it comes to the route you can take to progress (occasionally this confuses the button that shows your objective, though). At times it feels like this freedom chafes with the potential for great puzzle design, like a level where you're navigating by sparse light and few shadows, while cracks of lightning shift them dramatically... though it's almost a non-factor as a navigational challenge. Even at only a couple of hours long, it can feel overstretched, but it's well worth jumping into even so. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 No easy task as he's constantly on the move. Stay put, human! 2 Checkpointing can also be inconsistent, but may depend on your speed.

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PRICE** £7.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Beijing Jiao Dian Chuang Yi Digital Technology **DEV** Candleman Games **PLAYERS** 1

Place props
Place Will in target position #1
Place Explosive 1 in target position #2
Place Explosive 2 in target position #1 (5s)
Place Explosive 2 in target position #2
Will
Explosive 2
Explosive 1

Exhausted Man

No rest for the physicked

Finally a game about what it's like to make a magazine. Considering everyone we tell about this one can see themselves in it, it speaks to a very real sense of utter exhaustion and burnout common today.

But here that exhaustion is far from serious, taking a self-deprecating winking tone to power a comedy physics puzzler. Controlling your character like a caterpillar, you push them around the floor and solid surfaces, trying to avoid taking too many naps as you complete many, many tasks.

Each face button controls a limb, meaning you can use your legs to kick objects about your room, or your hands to grasp and rearrange things. Like noodles, though, they're just as hard to control as your body, and can become entangled with the rest of you if you're not careful.

The bulk of the game revolves around taking game developer ArtB/ade through the final push to develop a game demo as part of a game jam.[1]

The structure is a tad too convoluted for its own good. Your bedroom is a 'set', and each event is a 'card' you play that'll affect your total task progress or energy levels.[2] Each one you complete allows you to add more 'props' to the room, contributing to the chaos while also giving you more options to assign them roles in a scene. Most tasks revolve around precisely placing objects in specific zones, and you can decide for a challenge what counts as, for instance, a game monster. For that, pick a plush that's been corrupted into moving around by another event, and you'll make it harder for yourself to wrangle it. With a tactile crafty art style, it's fun to bumble around for an hour or two, but there's not much variety or even additional missions. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

6 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 The tutorial has you controlling Olivia as she obtains an Exhausted Yoga qualification. The main game could use more variety like this. 2 It at least means the physics chaos is in short bursts, so it rarely overwhelms. Though fine-control tasks like object stacking still frustrate no matter how segmented off they are. Choose wisely!

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PRICE** £11.99
ETA Out now **PUB** Playism **DEV** Silver Lining Studio **PLAYERS** 1

The Star Named EOS

Snapshots of memory

Your mother has gone away, but with her letters and the camera she got you for your birthday, you're following in the footsteps of the journey she took – remembering her lessons about capturing the world's beauty.

You're fixed in place in each stage, able to look around and interact with wonderfully drawn 2D artwork that's used to create 360-degree spaces filled with puzzles that require poking around for many a secret code.[1] Your ultimate goal is to find objects to create your own take on your mother's photos. One, of a camping tent, you can recreate as a sort of a collage based around a billboard ad. It's a neat way of building on perspective across both the physical and the mental planes – memories shape us.

The further you progress, the more this is emphasised, with even the locations you explore recast in different ways as you reflect on their different meanings, making for a neatly constructed, poignant narrative across the game's two-to-three hour runtime. We will say, though, that we prefer the clearer construction of puzzles in the first half – things get more story-heavy in the second, and puzzles that are a little more abstract are introduced. It doesn't help that this PS5 port has an agonisingly slow cursor which you use to interact with things, meaning the more inventory management you have to do, the more laborious it becomes – especially when you're not sure what to put where towards the end.[2] Optional photo opps for your album keep you curious, and most puzzles are fun to work out while rarely being taxing. Combined with a gorgeous art style, these memories are worth revisiting. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

7 PLAY

FOOTNOTES 1 Puzzles are a lot like those in hidden picture games, without the hidden pictures. 2 This can detract from some emotional moments, too.

Let's School

Just another brick in the wall

Headmaster Bo Ring is teaching her first class and, somehow, she inadvertently lets a panda and a cat loose. Children fawn over them while little Timmy flails about, stuck in a stool. As if nothing has happened, class resumes. "I see", says Jane, as the panda obscures her poor, innocent face. We're sorry Jane, but we don't think you do.

This would be charming if the game were intended to be an off-the-wall management sim, but Let's School's presentation is more uneven than it is off-kilter, and much of its humour comes from a series of buggy events. The tonal inconsistency also makes for some unintentionally questionable undertones. For example, you are immediately presented with a not-at-all-suspicious note from your former headmaster, who's passing the mantle to you after royally screwing everything up. Dialling up the dubiousness he says, "By the time you read this, I will be... retired," before explaining he's (definitely voluntarily) travelling the world.

All right then, moving on. As soon as you enter the environment, the inconsistency of its visual design is striking. The cover art suggests a coherent, cutesy aesthetic, but instead you're presented with a mishmash of pixel art, voxel-esque scenery, and 3D sprites that are sharply polygonal. The latter would work if the intent was to be a Bullfrog throwback, but Let's School lacks modern tweaks that make homages enjoyable.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £15.49
ETA Out now
PUB PM Studios
DEV Pathea Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 25+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Audio toggles; customisable difficulty settings

SOMEHOW I MANAGE

So far, so janky, but what about the management side of things? You're given four potential goals to work towards but choosing one is a formality, as you'll be progressing them all to succeed. Unlike in the Two Point series, where you have a different objective per facility in career mode, this is your catch-all school and if you fail you start from scratch. Access to everything in one run offers unbridled freedom, but is limiting in terms of replayability.

The jewel in its kid's meal crown is the class scheduling system. You spend the vast majority of your time planning lessons and ascertaining the best way for students to achieve their individual ambitions. By researching special courses, getting the right balance of teachers, and enhancing departmental management, you can boost particular classes and push students who are lagging behind over the line. This is a satisfying loop, with the 'one more turn' compulsion frequently kicking in. Encouraging creative thinking to make sure those in the minority don't fall through the cracks, as they often do in reality, is a solid central goal.

It's a shame, then, that some of its most interesting concepts fall to the wayside in favour of granular business operations and creating a production line of

Access to everything in one run offers unbridled freedom but is limiting in terms of replayability.

1 Your headmaster can dab in excitement, but students stay glassy-eyed at graduation. 2 Disconcerting character models look like push puppets. 3 You can hatch a couple of pets from your inventory. Why? Just blocky vibes.

drones. On the surface, Field Trips present another dimension to the growth of your school and its students; instead of running schools in other districts, you gain knowledge, access to resources, and set up admissions offices to increase the student variety. But, like many of its systems, it's let down by lack of polish and routine updates, becoming a soulless process.

OFF WITH THE HEAD!

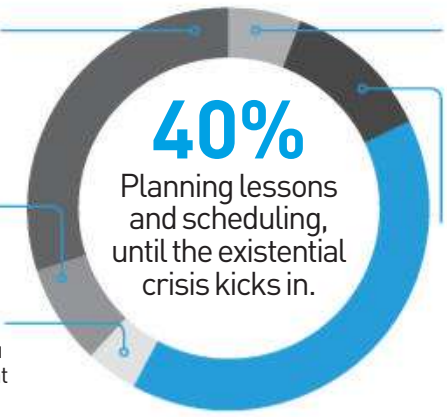
Moments to stop and smell the roses are few and far between, but when you do get one, you realise how little there is to observe. In particular, the third-person Headmaster mode highlights its visual clunkiness and is a glaring reminder of the game's flaws. Repetitive dialogue, limited animations, and an underdeveloped relationship system remove any compulsion to see what happens when more facilities are added. The idea of helping students succeed is lost beneath a deluge of bureaucratic goals and min-maxing every aspect of school life. From corporate growth to reputation management and admitting rich kids to maintain funds, the cold, hard realities are at the forefront and it becomes a sobering reminder of the education system and how success is measured. It has a complex and gratifying centre if you're keen to dig into the minutiae of running a business, but if you'd rather be creative and get abreast of paperwork from time to time, you'll crave the human touch.

A compelling gameplay loop is held together by glue sticks and masking tape, with a mix-and-match art style that barely conceals its fragile foundations. Emma Withington

5 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: LET'S SCHOOL



30% Expanding your school and working students hard so you can build a library.

8% Heartlessly judging student admissions.

4% Confiscating! Cony Portable, you say? We'll take that off your hands.

6% Watching a large polygonal panda glide through the halls and the walls.

12% Deciphering menus and getting jumpscared by its blueprint mode.

HOW TO... ACQUIRE SPECIAL ITEMS

On Fridays, the PTA comes to visit. You can earn PTA points for buff-tastic items in exchange for confiscated contraband. Think twice before joining forces though, as they offer items like 'Father's Belt'. It's designed to instil fear rather than use, but really shouldn't exist.

STATPACK

03
School locations. Choose from flowery Sakura Valley, riverside Peony Springs, and mountainous Snow Cotton Town.

75
Research modules, split into lifestyle, education, clubs, and management. We prioritise education, to gain higher-level classes.

04
Goals: Teaching Victory, Population Victory, Facility Victory, and Club Victory. All naturally progress simultaneously.

LOVING/HATING

GOLD STAR
Events bring some much-needed life to your school – seeing kids dressed as spooky ghosts and pumpkins boosts its character.

DETENTION
The unintuitive UI features menus on top of menus and fiddly mapping, which makes for stilted and frustrating gameplay.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Sell the students' snowmen. Heartlessly demolish them and get cash back.

SILVER
Meet the spirit of the well for this trophy. Time to guess which student fell in.

GOLD
Win a game on hard. Crunch those numbers; success will only cost your soul.

Mark sleepwalks through life, only to stumble upon a new reality that feels like something out of a dream.

Until Then

Cathy, don't lose my number

The world hasn't ended yet – but what do we do now? In this PlayStation debut from Philippines-based developer Polychroma Games, the world is still recovering from a period of multiple, coinciding natural disasters called The Ruling. Towns were levelled, homes swallowed up, and families torn apart. All of that was a year ago, but that doesn't mean it's *over* for anyone.

Teen protagonist Mark is left to reckon with the aftermath of The Ruling alone, as both his parents work abroad in order to give him the best life they possibly can – is it any wonder that he's not really applying himself at school? As he sleepwalks through class projects and stumbles over piano practice, his day-to-day is invaded by an unsettling sense of déjà vu, like he's done this all before – and a chance conversation about the weather suggests he may not be the only one feeling this way.

By most definitions, Until Then is a visual novel with standout presentation. Taking place in lavish, diorama-like scenes that beautifully combine 2D pixel art with 3D lighting, the story plays with elements of magical realism – a literary genre that portrays the mundane with an undercurrent of the fantastic. Demonstrating a creative confidence rarely seen in debut indies, Until Then is content to keep you guessing whether this is a genuinely magical phenomenon or simply symptoms of a terribly harsh reality the characters are all struggling to accept.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £15.99
ETA Out now
PUB Maximum Entertainment
DEV Polychroma Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 18+ hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Scene and chapter select from main menu; text speed slider; remappable controls

PREDICT SUCCESS

Mark's so-called life is punctuated by minigames that are for the most part charming, though frequently rough around the edges. For instance, despite music being a key theme, rhythm minigames are compromised inclusions, often smooshed into part of the frame that makes it difficult to properly anticipate upcoming button prompts. While there's a welcome variety of shifts in gameplay like this, many stand out as decidedly underbaked amid what is an otherwise beautifully presented creative vision. Beyond these often one-off side-attractions – which also include bobbing for fish balls with a new friend and a selection of actual fairground games – interactivity is largely limited to dialogue options.

Much of the cast's social life is mediated through their phones, with social media offering a bigger picture one post at a time. Text message conversations are smartly deployed too, with Mark's inner world hinted at through all the things he types but *doesn't* send. There's a lot to read but, much like that friend who only texts in 30-character bursts, dialogue throughout is punchy and well-paced.

At such a tender age, few things feel worse than being left on read – and strong, well-

Well-observed writing will leave you dreading the glower of an unanswered text message.

1 Expressive pixel art gives Until Then a memorable visual identity. **2** Dialogue choices offer few story branches. **3** Chromatic aberration creates a subtle feeling of unease without overwhelming the visual direction.

observed writing will leave you dreading the glower of an unanswered text message.

GET THE MESSAGE

Like we said before, there's a willingness to keep you asking, 'Where is this going?' And when we finally get there, there's not a dry eye among Team PLAY. After a number of hours, Until Then offers one answer that sidelines the supernatural elements in favour of an a gutting coming-of-age fable – and then reveals that not only is this far from the full picture, but you can 'fix' this sorry scene. Having spent many hours investing in its characters and laying narrative ground work, it's a creative choice that at first feels like it undercuts much of what came before. This makes for an uneven middle as we try to regain our narrative footing while spending perhaps slightly too much time retracing familiar territory.

But to put it another way without saying *too* much: 'second verse, same as the first – apart from this brand-new, devastating bridge.'

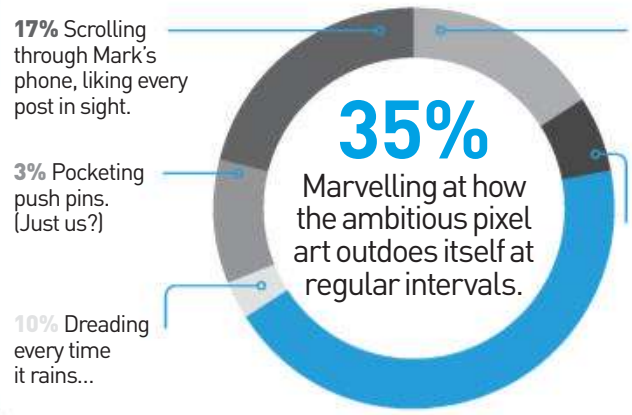
On the other side of that bridge is a final stretch that brings to mind genre greats such as Steins;Gate. To say much more really would be a spoiler, so we'll say this instead: we cannot travel in time, and parallel universes remain inaccessible to us, but psychic pain will tell you otherwise, holding you tightly in its looping refrain. Until Then is a stunning coming-of-age tale that assures, 'To move forward is not a betrayal. Fly free, little butterfly.'

A stunning coming-of-age tale. Despite half-baked minigames and a slow middle section, gorgeous pixel art and strong writing make it worth your time. Jess Kinghorn

8 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: UNTIL THEN



17% Scrolling through Mark's phone, liking every post in sight.

3% Pocketing push pins. (Just us?)

10% Dreading every time it rains...

23% Agonising over heated text chats, paying close attention to everything the cast *isn't* saying.

12% Appreciating the minigame variety, but wishing each one had just a bit more polish.

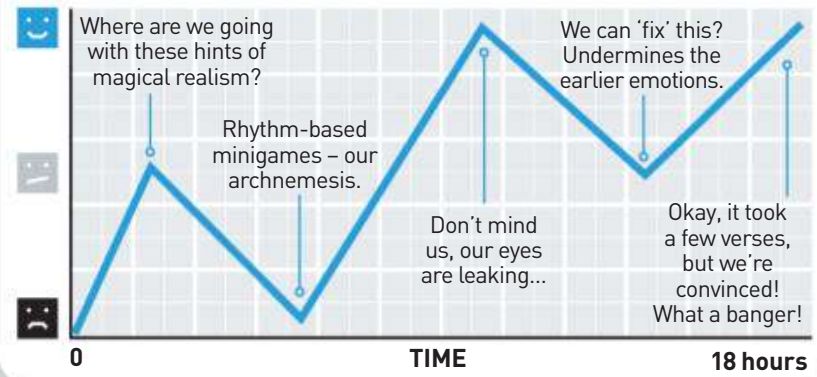
FRIENDS & ENEMIES

CATHY
Mark's best pal. Our fave bi disaster, she's got a list of crushes as long as her arm.

LOUISE
The class president. Stern at first, Mark soon sees many different sides to her.

NICOLE
The new transfer student... but Mark is certain they've met somewhere before.

COMPEL-O-GRAPH


Where are we going with these hints of magical realism?
Rhythm-based minigames – our archnemesis.
Don't mind us, our eyes are leaking...
We can 'fix' this? Undermines the earlier emotions.
Okay, it took a few verses, but we're convinced! What a banger!
0
TIME
18 hours

LOVING/HATING

A STRONGER REFRAIN
What really sings is the writing's commitment to its characters... and the wringer the story puts them through.

HALF-BAKED HARMONY
Not all minigames are created equal. Despite music being an important throughline, the rhythm section is in the roughest shape.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Hold up the whole line by paying for your train fare with one-peso coins *only*.

SILVER
Scare up a storm and beat the competition in Aswang World at the fair.

GOLD
Blow them all away on Christmas day with a score of 100 on the videoke.

Pixel-peeking at the screenshots suggests dynamic scaling is employed. You'll never have time to notice.

Cygni: All Guns Blazing

Not a baby swan in sight in this arcadey shmup

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £25.99
ETA Out now
PUB Konami
DEV KeelWorks
PLAYERS 1-2
LENGTH 6 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Autofire; control remapping; adjustable HUD size, and subtitle size; subtitles

Two former Pixar VFX artists got a grant from Unreal and spent it making the most lavish and glossy vertically-scrolling shooter they could. Rather than redefining the genre, Cygni amplifies the action to alarming levels. This is a seriously slick experience that blends mid-'90s design philosophy with cutting-edge visuals, while sounding like a fireworks box mishap at The Proms.

You won't dare to blink as enemies fly down the screen, mesmerising you with geometric bullet patterns before the massive bosses appear. The game is compact without feeling too small, spanning seven levels that take between ten and 20 minutes each. The first is arguably the best because it demands phenomenal concentration yet rarely descends into chaos like later levels can.

STOP THE MADNESS!

It's a good idea to play through the tutorial. Twice. Understanding how your ship's many offensive systems work is essential, but basically boils down to a balancing act between juggling shield level and firepower, trading one for the other at any time using L1 and R1. Enemies drop Energy Points, which float around and give you one bar of shield back, with any surplus going towards upgrades. There are standard air and ground attacks, plus homing missiles which cost weapon energy. It's complex but works well once you get used to it.

The trouble is, the need for pixel-perfect bullet dodging gives way as torrents of enemies are sent towards you. You can't possibly shoot them all, and when the screen then also fills with tiny lasers to dodge, your brain will break, and something in the gameplay does too. Play turns into a fervent quest for Energy Points to top up your constantly-depleted shields, removing the finesse as you blast away, recklessly taking bullets like a laser-spewing Tony Montana.

> You blast away at enemies, recklessly taking bullets like a laser-spewing Tony Montana.

Despite many moments of such excess that suddenly feel surprisingly dull, in the rest of the game a heck of a lot is done right. The upgrades don't break the balancing, the visuals are wonderful, and the boss fights are exemplary, if a little samey. The short cinematics are nicely presented, and there's same-screen local co-op if you want to include a (little) friend. There's also an arcade mode in which upgrades are already unlocked and high scores are uploaded, though it still looks very serious.

Cygni lacks the charm of classic shmups like Gunbird 2, and there's no overtly original mechanism like Ikaruga's black/white switching or Sine Mora's deliberate slowdown. However, its strait-laced approach is actually refreshing. If you ever fancied a PS5-quality take on the retro shooter, this is a great one to get stuck into. Just try to remember to blink.

A frantic, chaotic, visually splendid shooter that plays like it came from the mid-'90s. It can be overwhelming, but when the bosses go down, you'll feel immense. **Justin Towell**

7
PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £49.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Sega **DEV** CyberConnect2 **LENGTH** As long as the party mood lasts! **PLAYERS** 1-4

Demon Slayer -Kimetsu No Yaiba- Sweep The Board!

Bringing a sword to boardgame night

Look, you can't get around it – the virtual boardgame genre, where competing across squares is interspersed with going head-to-head in minigames, is dominated by the large shadow of a certain bedenimed Nintendo mascot's own party series. While Demon Slayer's take brings a welcome, if mild, refresh, it has its moustachioed rival beaten in one important area: it's here on PlayStation!

Otherwise, it's hard to avoid drawing direct comparisons to its genre predecessors. While Demon Slayer is a heavyweight manga and anime property in its own right (and games based on it have been released in the past with varying success), this is still a game where you land on blue squares to accrue small sums of currency, avoid red ones lest you lose your loot, and finish each round with a minigame. Tried and tested is one thing – familiarity can be good – but it can also make it hard for a game to stand out.

This one's licensed nature gives it an advantage on that point. There's the simple visual delight that results from it being set in the beloved shonen series' world. With its vibrant art style, charming locations, and well-known characters, Sweep The Board makes the most of its source material to deliver some good vibes, even if that sometimes involves being confronted by devilish foes or, much worse, bad dice rolls.

The boardgame mechanics aren't totally lacking innovation. The way you win feels unique: players have to aim for specific destination squares. Land on one first and you hoover up Rank Points and progress the day/night cycle. At nighttime, new enemy-infested spaces appear, and a boss demon arrives to guard the next destination square. Land on it in this state, and a rhythm battle triggers where all players get stuck in to fell it (the one who does best still gets the most points). It's a fun way to integrate the show's sense of danger. It's good fun with friends, especially if they're fellow Demon Slayer fans... provided you play offline. Wonky online features refused to function at time of writing. We'd rather argue over the boardgame after we actually begin, at least.

In a genre filled with top-tier competition, Sweep The Board's use of Demon Slayer helps it stand out – series fans will, of course, enjoy it the most. **James Daly**

7 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut for lengthy reviews. This month we're diving into the Purribean, duelling, and doing the deductive dance of the detective.

First up, we're setting sail with **Cat Quest III**. Developer The Gentlebros returns with another 2.5 D adventure, though this time with a swashbuckling edge as you explore the Purribean as a Purrivateer. In addition to hacking-and-slashing up a storm, ship-based combat lobs cannon fire into the fray for the first time. Make no mistake, this remains a straightforward quest across both sea and land, and is so simple it's purrfect for the tiny paws in your life. However, if your tolerance for cat-based wordplay is low, then you may be better off plotting a course for more sensible waters because the ones we've repeated are really just the tip of the furry iceberg.

Leaping away from that – is the lack of a release date for Hollow Knight: Silksong making you sweat? **Bo: Path Of The Teal Lotus** might scratch that metroidvania itch. As it features similarly jabby combat and an occasionally subterranean setting, it's hard not to make the comparison. But, boasting gorgeous visual direction inspired by traditional Japanese art, Bo is distinguished by daruma projectiles and an emphasis on mid-air combat. Unfortunately, it never feels as wonderfully responsive as the insectoid legend, and exploration is comparatively lightweight, especially as you jog slowly around some overly large areas. Still, if you're put off by HK's difficulty, you'll appreciate Bo's inclusion of slow-down and invincibility options.

Changing pace, next up is **Nobody Wants To Die**, a neo-noir thriller where you play as a detective who is definitely too old for this *blorp!*. Immortality is within reach as long as you can afford the subscription for an appropriate body but, while we dread to think what the late fee policy looks like, worse still there's a murderer on the loose who's *actually* offing subscription-paying civvies – how barbaric! The game takes a narrative-forward approach, leaving you to consider the clues and soak in the atmosphere of what is a technically impressive though incredibly bleak-retro futuristic setting. Maybe those cat puns weren't so bad after all...

Zenless Zone Zero

Waiting for the wake-up call

Agents have their own quirks. Corin here can pause mid-combo to let her buzzsaw broom whirl!

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE Free (microtransactions available)
ETA Out now
PUB HoYoverse
DEV HoYoverse
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 1 (main missions), 1-4 (in minigames)
CROSSPLAY PC, mobile
CROSS-GEN N/A

What do you do when you've mastered the gacha live service genre? Compete with yourself. Zenless Zone Zero joins HoYoverse's lineup alongside the wildly successful Genshin Impact and Honkai: Star Rail, both inescapable on the PS Store.

While it has a lot of similarities with those other games, down to its microtransaction structure and even how the characters' equipment and levelling up works, there's a lot to set Zenless Zone Zero apart. For starters, its gorgeous art style, while still anime-inspired, feels unique. More characters, from the Agents you play as to friendly NPCs around town, have distinctive models that are packed with character. For example, Tin Master, who runs the energy-boosting coffee shop, has a coffee maker grafted onto his robot head. On the playable side, Billy Kidd, a slick sharpshooter obsessed with superheroes, has a sleek body that, as he moves, stretches like in classic cartoons, emphasising his wiry nature, while Ben Bigger is just a massive bear with an incredible fashion sense.

> Flashy attacks feature detailed animation and look great while still feeling responsive.

You can play as Billy, Ben, and a multitude of other colourful heroes (most of whom you'll have to earn through gacha pulls – rough if you can't resist spending) throughout ZZZ's many character action brawls. That's new for HoYoverse, but the studio's got the chops for it. Every character's flashy attacks

PLAYER AGENCY

01

The Cunning Hares (officially Gentle House) are fixers and thieves with hearts of gold, and the first faction you help out. Leader Nicole, plus Anby and Billy, are your free starting Agents.

02

Later, construction firm Belobog Heavy Industries enlists your help to track down its rogue AI-building machinery. Split between shock and fire attacks, most of its Agents can dish out some serious damage.

03

Victoria Housekeeping are a clean up crew in a different sense than their maid and butler uniforms would suggest. Buzzsaws, scissor blades, ice gauntlets, and haunted dolls make them a formidable group.

and desperate dodges feature detailed animation and, importantly, looks great while still feeling responsive. You're always in control, and the three-party system that has you tag-teaming enemies once you've stunned them means the action frequently feels like it's building up.

ZERO HOUR

The down side is, despite these highs, it's all spread a bit thinly. Combat gets repetitive fast as even though each Agent has smartly designed, unique little combat loops, encounters aren't demanding enough for you to need to worry about applying them much. Harder fights merely mean bigger health bars to grind down.

The story, too, is sometimes excellent, with fantastic cutscenes. But it's frequently interrupted by level-grinding requirements. It's an inelegant road to the launch endgame, perhaps to keep you on the treadmill – though it leaves us feeling like our time is being wasted rather than keeping us hooked.

Samey combat is broken up by being presented across different modes, many revolving around boardgame-like navigation. Others have analogues to Honkai missions, like the combat challenges and roguelike mode, but suffer against that game's years of iteration to perfect the formula. Rally Commissions, proper levels like Devil May Cry, feature but are few in number. Undoubtedly ZZZ will improve, but the foundation needs some work.

Energetic and charming, the structure is spread too thinly and too repetitive as it stands, leaving us wishing for more of the more authored stages. Oscar Taylor-Kent

6 PLAY

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit

We could have at least killed these guys first, Murkoff. Really.

The Outlast Trials – Project Lupara

In his own Barbi world

Turns out stress isn't bad for the baby after all. At least, not for unhinged manchild Franco 'Il Bambino' Barbi, the latest boss you face in an update that just came to The Outlast Trials.

Bambino is the son of a mafia don with a taste for bloodshed and an absolutely inappropriate relationship with his sawn-off shotgun. This implement makes him Outlast's first ranged enemy, which presents a whole new kind of danger. He might not run very fast, but he can and *will* shoot at you across large expanses of the docks map – and being under fire is quite a hindrance to sneaking around undertaking Murkoff's reprehensible tasks of the hour.

Speaking of which, Bambino's trial introduces a couple of additional mechanics. The main one is remarkably like one of the old mechanics but spinnier. Instead of running around looking for keys with symbols on, you now have to use a special decoder on symbols spray-painted around the area to get a code to unlock safes. The symbols need to be viewed from precisely the right angle to line up correctly, which can sadistically dangle your objective in front of you sometimes. The concept is solid, but in reality it's just another way to string out the already lengthy trials.

INFO

FORMAT PS5, PS4
PUB Red Barrels
DEV Red Barrels
YEAR 2024

BOSS BABY

On the other hand, the overhaul of the progression system has made completing trials much more rewarding, and selecting customisation items from the expansive amount available is much more streamlined thanks to the use of catalogues.

> As Outlast's first ranged enemy Bambino presents a whole new kind of danger.

While it leans into some of the more common live service features, The Outlast Trials is pretty generous. The cosmetics catalogue added with Bambino is a permanent addition you can unlock after completing the base one, just as he and his level are permanent even when he stops hogging the spotlight as star of the current event. Which, as a fun touch, does mean he can show up in other trials. There's no escaping this needy guy.

The co-op angle is coming on in leaps and bounds, but the single-player is still a far cry from the sort of messed-up party game The Outlast Trials is clearly geared towards being. Still, the adjustments and the 'a bit more of everything' approach to updates are taking the game in the right direction. **Max Williams**

College Football 25

EA's upstart flirts with Gridiron greatness

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PUB** EA
DEV EA Orlando **YEAR** 2024

Thanks to Ultimate Team – yes, that's a sarcastic thanks – it's been a long, long, *long* time since any sports sim has delivered an unputdownable managerial mode. So all hail College Football 25. It may look like a Madden spinoff, but this is so much more, with 134 varsity teams represented perfectly and Dynasty providing a coach career experience that repeatedly pulls you back in.

College players can only stay for four years before they're moved on – that's a fixed rule for the sport, and one that presents you as coach with a clear challenge. You're constantly having to overhaul your roster using the in-game recruitment mechanic, identifying potential players and persuading them to join your team. Those myriad rival schools fight hard for the best talent, so managing your prospects list and committing in-game hours to bringing them in for visits or selling your programme's strengths takes up even more time than playing matches. But oh lord, is it addictive. And it's also brutal, when your top target opts to sign elsewhere.

Indeed, this is a game with minimal coddling, and that's what makes it so great. Matches are fast-paced, and skilful offensive talents – accurate quarterbacks, elusive runners, rapid receivers – thrive. Playing defence can be rock-hard, but the same is true of real college ball. Pair in ridiculous levels of depth, with 11,390 real players and accurate stadia for all those teams, and resisting the temptation to advance just-one-more-week in Dynasty is impossible. It'll keep you up until 2am, then leave you sleepless over whether that five-star recruit is going to sign for you or LSU.

> It'll keep you up until 2am, then leave you sleepless over whether that recruit is going to sign.

Ultimate Team is still part of the package, and serves up legends such as Ray Lewis for your fantasy roster. But for once, it's a nonintrusive distraction rather than the main event. College Football 25 is all about Dynasty, and all the better for that brave design decision. **Ben Wilson**

Asphalt Legends Unite

A fuel-guzzling free racer

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 **PUB** Gameloft
DEV Gameloft **YEAR** 2024

This free-to-play racer makes its PlayStation debut, and thanks to being an updated version of Asphalt 9: Legends (which launched on mobile platforms in 2018), it's already loaded with content.

Built around short bursts of racing (races last maybe a minute or less), often with simplistic side-objectives besides winning (drifting for a certain amount of time, for instance), its mobile origins are clear. But these gorgeous tracks look anything but made for mobile, popping with stylised colour instead of going one-on-one with Gran Turismo 7's realism.

You're able to pump nitro for a burst of speed and do a full 360-degree spin to take out rivals – this is the heightened reality of arcadey racers. Track designs reflect the arcade spirit, ranging from a ruined shipwreck on Scotland's rocky coast to a full-on tornado.

As well as normal racing controls, 'TouchDrive' is an option. Designed presumably for touchscreen play (you don't use the touchpad), it auto-drives while allowing you to pick out routes – do you go for the big jump, the nitro, or play it safe? – all while still being able to choose your drift and boost moments yourself.

It's a neat option, though one that may belie the amount of grinding in store. While career races are plentiful, to get your mitts on all the cars you'll need to replay refreshing challenges over and over in order to slowly earn blueprints needed to assemble cars. To improve, do better, and earn more, you need to upgrade your cars, and that means spending oodles of coins to keep up. Fuel diminishes (and recharges) per car, so the more well-specced cars you have in your garage, the more you can play. While the game's generous early on, it feels like keeping pace may be tough enough that I'll pitstop here. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

> To get your mitts on all the cars you'll need to play challenges over and over.

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Neither losing sight of its legacy or Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Dragon's Dogma 2

Toss saurians over your shoulder to lob them off cliffs, clutch onto griffins for dear life as they soar away, or simply combo chimera into oblivion. From fights with big beasties to how you solve quests, this RPG epic bends to how you play while offering a challenge worth rising to.

07

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

08

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

09

Uncharted: Legacy Of Thieves Collection

The best got better. Presenting Nathan Drake's final outing alongside spin-off The Lost Legacy, this collection implements a range of PS5 features. Higher framerates smooth out the action, haptic feedback boosts gunfights, and 3D audio adds a new dimension to the banter.

10

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one with this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

11

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

12

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking, new weird adventure sings on PS5. A framerate of 60fps delights, and Remedy's use of ray tracing is among the best we've seen. The sole problem is you're able to pick only one of two visual options.

13

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

14

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

15

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

16

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

17

Pentiment

Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

18

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

19

Helldivers 2

It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

20

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

21

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

22

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

23

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

24

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

25

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

2021's **Hitman 3** is in many ways the complete stealth puzzler package. Painting the world red across globetrotting, almost immersive sim-style levels, it's the perfect capstone to the World Of Assassination. If you're after more bloody brilliant murder puzzles, try these three other hits.

PICK #1

Hitman HD Enhanced Collection

Back to basics

Seeing double? Yes, it's another Agent 47 contract but this rerelease is worth revisiting. It presents 2012's Absolution and 2006's Blood Money in 4K for the first time. While Absolution is an interesting but oddly linear entry to look back on, Blood Money remains a stone-cold classic where the hits don't stop, from devilish disguises to iconic takedowns such as death by hot tub. Offering a wealth of options for offing your mark, it's not hard to see where the World Of Assassination trilogy gets so many of its ideas.

PICK #2

Dishonoured: Death Of The Outsider

Blink – you won't miss it

There are few videogame premises as irresistible as 'kill a god'. As Billie Lurk, you employ a variety of deadly tools – from explosives to a wrist-mounted crossbow – plus the ability to teleport across the map and to steal the faces of your foes for a limited time. Unlike in earlier entries in Arkane's first-person stealth series, you can get to grips with your strange abilities from much earlier on. The catch is you've been tasked with zero-ing the very deity who gave you those powers. Now *that's* a ripping good yarn!

PICK #3

Shadow Gambit: The Cursed Crew

'X' marks the spot

What's worse than an assassin with nothing to lose? An *undead* assassin! This stealth title shimmies along a top-down tactical edge as you climb aboard a literal ghost ship in order to carry out the crew's last request. Instead of disguises, you've got a diverse roster of swashbucklers, each boasting unique supernatural abilities, from tricksy time manipulation powers to a superhuman command of plants or even cannon fire. As dev Mimimi Games shut down in 2023, it's a magnificent swan song for the studio.

The crew make this one, offering everything from prickly plant powers to a spot of enemy possession.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Red Dead Redemption 2

You won't find another open world quite like this, the streets of Los Santos paling in comparison to this gorgeous, realistic western sprawl. Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure is epic, emotional, and has enough teasing mysteries on every horizon for no two cowboys' journeys to feel the same. With train robberies, tootin' headshots, and racists to kill, there's never a dull moment in Rockstar's greatest.

02

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V on PS4 is more than a mere HD remaster. Upped to a glorious 1080p, it weaves together everything that made the PS3 original great, with new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode.

03

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

04

The Last Of Us Part II

Arguably the original is holistically better but there are few games that push PS4 to its limits as this sequel does. With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup.

05

Dreams

This is a feature-laden platform of artistic tools that enables you to create everything from characters, elements, and scenes to entire games, and resets any ideas about what a console 'game' should be and do. Dreams should be installed on every PS4.

06

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt Game Of The Year Edition

The White Wolf's epic journey is an RPG experience like no other on PS4. It's been made even more spectacular with this gigantic pack stuffed with DLC, making it a must-have part of any gaming library.

07

Assassin's Creed Odyssey

A beautiful open world where every Greek island tells a unique story, AC Odyssey is a epic in the truest sense, with lively writing, mythical beasts to battle, and a poignant Assassin's Creed story that lays the table for all the delicious lore to come. A brilliant spectacle.

08

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

10

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

11

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

12

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

13

Monster Hunter: World

Presenting a vibrant open world, light on story but heavy on monster-mashing action, this is the most accessible entry in the series yet. Perfecting the feel-good grind through its complex systems and pitch-perfect multiplayer, it's a PS4 must-play.

14

Resident Evil 2

Powered by the RE Engine, this remake is more than a classic game with a facelift. The new Tyrant and improved zombie AI add tension, and fresh areas not seen in the PS1 classic update the core gameplay making this Resi 2 a celebration of PS1 *and* PS4.

15

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

16

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

17

Psychonauts 2

Level design and narrative mesh together in this long-awaited sequel. Bounce around vibrant, ever-creative platform worlds inside other peoples' minds as you help them conquer trauma – and save the world. Ever-warm, the script is one of the funniest around.

18

Nier: Automata

Few games require immediate replaying, but this *demands* it. The twisty-turny story reveals more just when you think you're done, and the android combat as you explore is top-notch thanks to PlatinumGames' expertise in creating character action titles.

19

Mass Effect Legendary Edition

A space opera in game form. Explore the galaxy as you try to stop a universe-wide threat, building a team of the best as you go. The adventures are better than ever in this smoothed-over version. A fan of science-fiction sagas? You owe it to yourself to have one of your own.

20

Days Gone

On the surface this seems to be a step backwards: a testosterone-fuelled Freaker-killing adventure, one man and his bike versus the apocalypse. Slowly you realise Bend Studio's playing with you, and everything's flipped on its head – while the action's excellent throughout.

21

Dragon Quest XI: Echoes Of An Elusive Age

JRPGs don't get more classic-feeling than this, but DQ embraces its traditional qualities, giving its turn-based fights and Toriyama-designed visuals a modern overhaul. This is an adventure that'll stick with you.

22

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, mixing a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

23

Alien: Isolation

Explore Ridley Scott's original vision of a horrifying future in startling fidelity, as this game recreates the tension with an attention to detail that borders on the obsessive. It's time to remember what made the xenomorph so scary... and then get killed by it.

24

Shadow Of The Colossus

Bluepoint completely overhauls the visuals of Team Ico's masterpiece but still manages to match the original step-for-step in its remake. New controls and a beautiful photo mode add to the package. Wander's tragic quest has never looked or played better.

25

New Star GP

This lo-fi racer is the best of both worlds, finding pole position as it pursues a dedication to career mode with arcadey joy. Its lack of licensing just makes it more lightweight, able to have fun with evolving racing rivalries and destruction that'd make famous marques cringe.

TAYLOR MADE DEALS

Watching the pennies? We'll help you play more without breaking the bank

UNDER £20

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

£20 approx (PS4, Cex)

A treasured price

A budget game to begin with (the original digital launch price was just £34.99, which is pretty good nowadays), this is nonetheless a superb price for what's not just one of our favourite metroidvanias, but one of our favourite Prince Of Persia games. You can even upgrade to the PS5 version for free (or spend a few quid more to get the white-bannered box for yourself). Combining some excellent platforming challenges that utilise a fluid movement system with snappy combat, it's a blast – though we have to admit that some of the backtracking can grow tiresome.

UNDER £15

Exoprimal

£15 approx (PS5, amazon.co.uk)

Unearthing a deal

People in mech suits with massive weapons taking on waves of hundreds of dinosaur baddies... why isn't everyone playing Exoprimal? We gave it 7/10 [*Back in PLAY #31, true believers!* – ed], but that's no bad thing. Best enjoyed with pals, this online blaster pits teams of players against each other, first taking out those masses of dinos before then foiling each other to pick up a win. While it starts out simple, an obtuse progression system hides a surprising amount of well-crafted content. Jump in while you can before it becomes extinct.

UNDER £10

Death's Door

£9.99 approx (PS5, ebay.co.uk)

Leading your wallet to heaven

Playing as a crow reaper, you're given the task of collecting the souls of those who have managed to avoid the cycle of life and death for a little too long. Navigating a vibrant and beautiful world through an isometric view full of secrets, there's a light soulslike touch to the considered combat – though it's more fast-paced and forgiving than FromSoftware's series, as you'd probably expect. Mastering each maze-like section of the map feels great, as does learning about each unique boss (we still love the ceramic-topped Urn Witch). Birds of a feather.

Bosses can be intimidating, but feel fair once you grasp their attacks.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01 Umurangi Generation VR

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, this modern classic sees that aphorism and raises it with righteous, rebellious rage. Ostensibly an immersive photography game, you have a range of lenses, camera settings, and filters to play with but there's a far bigger picture to be seen. Not only a master class in environmental storytelling, this is also testament to art as a powerful act of resistance.

02 Synapse

This roguelite shooter offers satisfying, stylish action in a monochrome world punctuated by colourful violence. It puts power in the palm of your hand – and your eyes. Going one step beyond point and shoot, PSVR2's eye-tracking tech allows you to glance and grab.

03 Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

04 Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

05 Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

06 Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

07 No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

08 Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

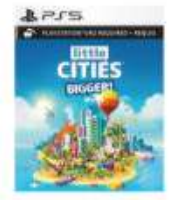
09 Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

10 Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

11 Little Cities: Bigger!



Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

12 Stilt

This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

13 Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

14 The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

15 The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

PSVR Hall of fame

GREAT EXPERIENCES TO THIS DAY

01

Astro Bot Rescue Mission

This pint-sized adventure packs charm in spades even if it isn't exactly chock-full of challenge. Bringing the classic puzzle platformer formula bang up to date in PSVR, it won't take many levels before you're calling out, "Beam me up, Botty!" Also, the nippers will love it.

02

The Persistence

This first-person horror roguelike offers perfectly sized chunks of survival bursts. It's everything you'd expect from a full PS4 release, but in PSVR it's filled with clever ideas, unique weapons, genuine jump scares, and fab looks – plus great couchplay as well.

03

Star Wars: Squadrons

A fan's dream come true: experience epic Star Wars space battles from the cockpits of the films' most famous starfighters. Whether you're flying a TIE fighter or X-wing there's absolutely no thrill like skimming the surface of a Star Destroyer in PS VR.

04

Resident Evil VII: Biohazard

Can you can go eye-to-eye with the Bakers? Playing in VR raises the tension to almost unbearable levels and has gameplay benefits such as face-aiming, which makes shooting a lot easier. A brilliant example of how VR can improve already great games.

05

Blood & Truth

The truth? You can't handle the truth. But if you can, then you'll discover one of PSVR's best shooters, tied to the kind of slick cinematic narrative we're used to from Sony's non-VR releases. Blood & Truth is one of the most complete games for PSVR.

06

Beat Saber

With your PSVR headset firmly on and PS Move controllers in hand, Beat Saber feels like the game both pieces of hardware were made for. In it you have to master songs and challenges by swiping your neon swords through the air and dodging with your head.

07

Iron Man VR

With a finely-crafted control setup that enables flight within small sandbox maps, and gives you the option to inhabit the designer shoes of the billionaire playboy too, Iron Man VR is an almost-perfect interpretation of the famous Avenger. It's a PSVR must-play.

08

Hitman 3

Every mission in the World Of Assassination trilogy can be played in PSVR via the latest entry in the series. That's a *lot* of murderous action. It all plays brilliantly too, with the act of puzzling through hits as Agent 47 perfectly suited to virtual reality. One of PSVR's best.

09

To The Top

This creative platform-puzzler enables you to scamper, jump, and skate across its 35 sandbox worlds with the aid of your PS Move controllers. It's as physically demanding to play as it is perplexing, and all the better for it. To The Top is a PSVR one-off.

10

I Expect You To Die 2: The Spy and The Liar

A spy comedy offering a front-row seated experience. Known as The Phoenix to your foes, you thwart villains across six missions delightfully steeped in genre tropes. Short, silly, and slick – like only the best agents.

WHAT'S NEW PLUS-SY CAT?

Digging into the random acts of gaming a lengthy PS Plus subscription offers

August's PS Plus offering taught us never to underestimate a pint-sized hero. On PS5 and PS4, **Five Nights At Freddy's: Security Breach** saw youngster Gregory dodging aggy animatronics, while **Ender Lilies: Quietus Of The Knights** on PS4 starred fragile dual protagonists.

But August's heat proved the real challenge to overcome, leaving us longing for chillier climes along the lines of an ice planet far, far away. Dreaming of Hoth, it's perhaps no surprise then that our column this month is led by **Lego Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga** on both PS5 and PS4.

As you'll know from our massive retrospective feature back in PLAY #42, the Skywalkers are no strangers to either Lego or PlayStation. Developer Traveller's Tales' experience on each front shines through in this ambitious brick-by-brick reimagining of the nine-film science-fantasy epic.

For this outing, the camera has been brought in slightly closer to the action, which can sometimes be a nuisance if you're cornered in combat, but often better serves to immerse you in the wonderfully detailed planet hubs. There's a wealth of things to do besides exploring iconic locations. Between lightsaber duels and X-wing gauntlets you're consistently rewarded for exploring off the beaten track – usually with Kyber brick upgrades, but on one memorable occasion a choir of wookiees.

Make no mistake, TT's trademark silliness is woven throughout this fully-voiced retelling, and it's a joy to experience in co-op. Smashing up the environment for studs still hits, though select boss fights will leave your player two with little to do but twiddle their thumbs. However, if it's just you, your co-pilot, and waves of stormtroopers with famously terrible aim, fighting the dark side is still a blast.

Relive the action as your favourites – or even a smaller player who *should have* got a bit more screen time.

DIGITAL OFFER

FOR PRINT SUBSCRIPTION DEALS, TURN TO PAGE 64

PS5 | PS4 | PSVR | RETRO
PLAY
NO.1 FOR PS5
CONCORD: FIRST IMPRESSIONS
WHY SONY'S FPS IS BETTER THAN YOU THINK
ISSUE 44 OCTOBER 2024
→HANDS-ON
MARVEL RIVALS
Venom! Star Lord! Jeff... the shark?! How the superhero shooter could beat out Overwatch 2
→IT TAKES TWO
ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS
Dual heroes in warring Japan – doubling up makes for the freshest AC in years!
→INTERVIEW
SHADOW GENERATIONS
Takashi Iizuka on the return of Sonic's edgier rival
FINAL FANTASY MEETS WWE: FFXIV'S BEST BOSS FIGHTS YET?
WHAT HAPPENED TO LEVEL DESTRUCTION?
WHY EA FC 25'S RUSH MODE IS AN ELECTRIC EVOLUTION
→EXCLUSIVE ACCESS
SILENT HILL 2
REMAKING A CLASSIC
Hands-on: Pyramid Head, crafting terror, and the pressure on the devs to get it right
→BITSUMMIT BLOWOUT
JAPAN'S HUGE INDIE GAME FEST
The cutting-edge smaller releases you can't miss
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MUSIC, VOICE, AND MIND OF A KILLER
Jesper Kyd and David Bateson on bringing Hitman to life
FUTURE

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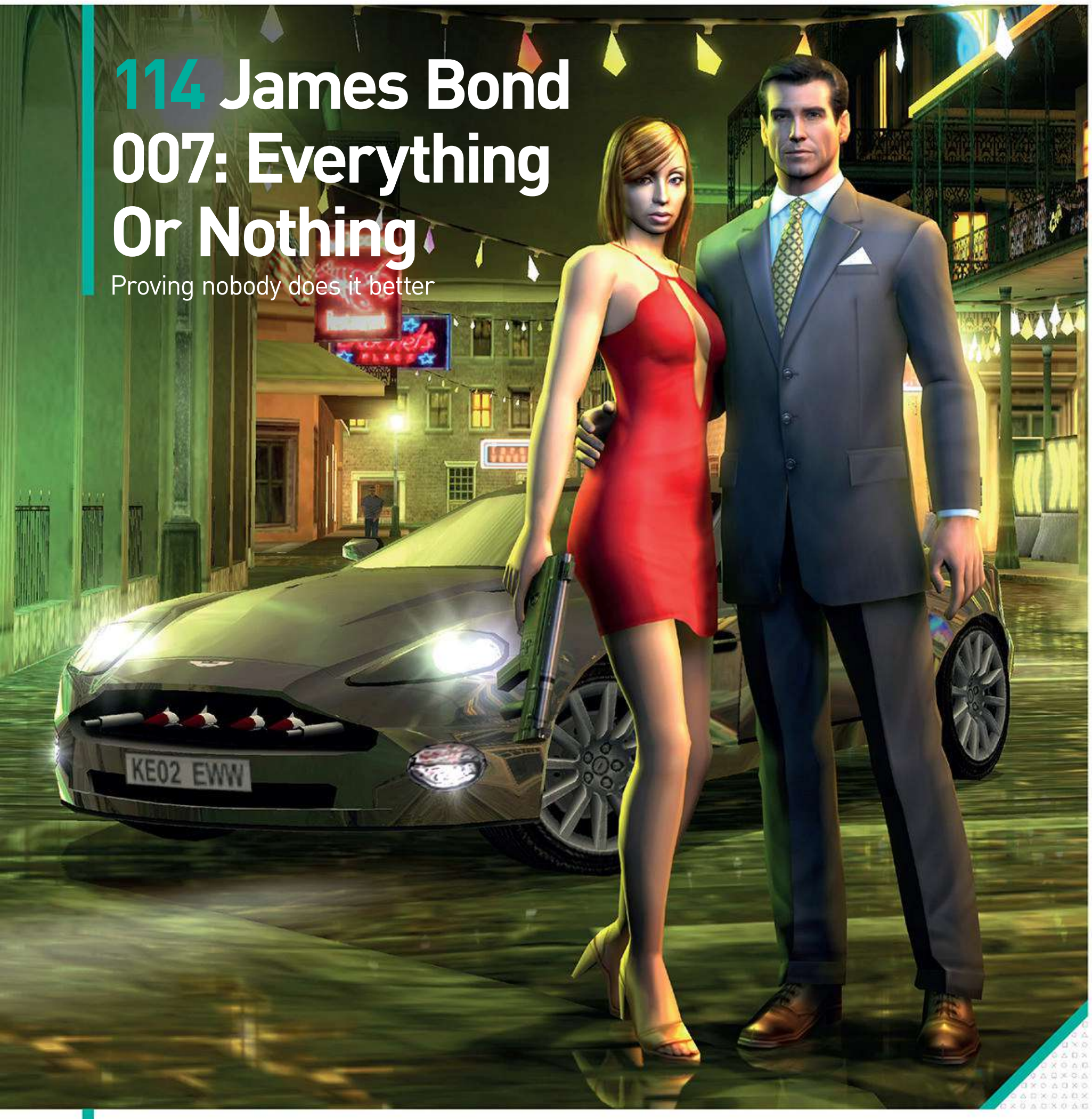
RetroStation



114 James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing

Proving nobody does it better

HIGHLIGHTS

MEMORY CARD: SILENT HILL 4: THE ROOM 108 | DEFENDING: ROMAN BELLIC 109
CLASSIC GAME: ECCO THE DOLPHIN: DEFENDER OF THE FUTURE 110
PLUS POINTS: DAXTER 112 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF... SPORTS 113 | PARTING SHOT 114

DON'T DELETE

Save icons for these September moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

10 YEARS

We made some wonderful lifelong enemies in Middle Earth: Shadow Of Mordor courtesy of its Nemesis system, wherein orcs that defeat you remember you and get more powerful. Where's that Wonder Woman game, Monolith?

15 YEARS

Little-known Liverpudlian four-piece The Beatles finally got their big break when they starred in The Beatles: Rock Band, and fights broke out in the office over who had to be Ringo. "I am the walrus," we mumbled bitterly as we failed that song on Expert yet again...

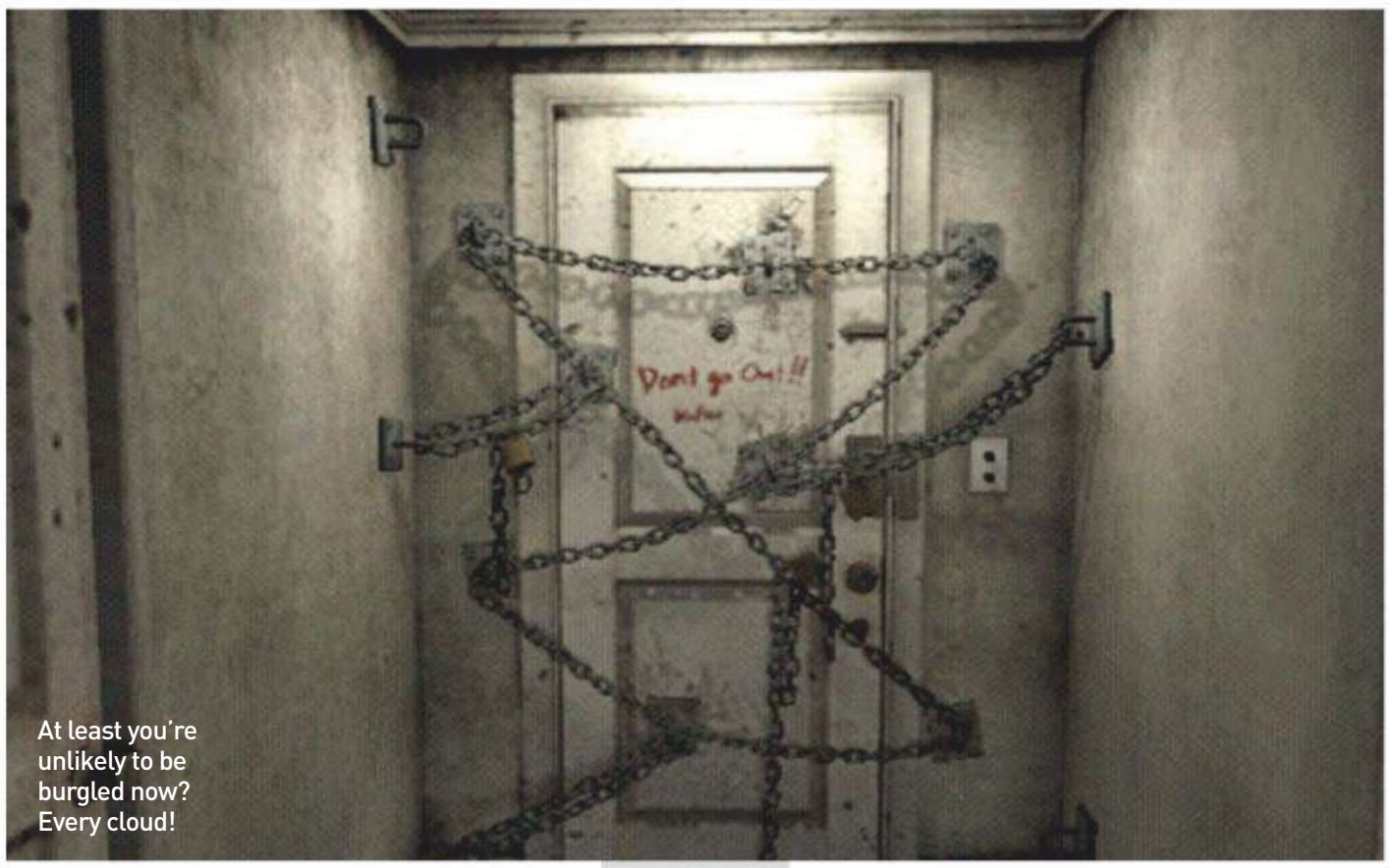
25 YEARS

We ran screaming through the zombie-stuffed streets of Raccoon City fleeing from the titular terror in Resident Evil 3: Nemesis. Want to feel the fear for yourself? The underrated remake is constantly on sale and well worth checking out.

MEMORY CARD

Silent Hill 4: The Room

20 years since we escaped! Wait... we *did* escape, right?



At least you're unlikely to be burgled now? Every cloud!

Original Silent Hill is a classic, 2's a masterpiece, 3 has its fans, but what about the divisive Silent Hill 4? "Didn't deserve the hate it got," argues reader **Steven Bell**. "Was up there with Silent Hill 2 as one of the best ones." **Ben Chodd** agrees. "Underrated. I loved the idea of your apartment turning into a Silent Hill-type place." You *loved* that idea...?

If you've never had the, er, 'pleasure', the game follows Henry Townsend, who wakes up one day to find the only exit to his apartment sealed shut. "It's kind of like how self-isolation went during covid," says **Oskar Fredriksson**. "You couldn't leave the apartment and had no communication with the outside world." Sorry that you endured lockdown with no contact with the outside world, Oskar!

Henry does find a way out. Unfortunately, it's through a creeptacular hole in the wall that sends him to a subway station full of horrible bleeding dog monsters. Each grim area ends with Henry once again in his flat, the only safe space in the game.

Ah, but where this one gets clever is when it starts turning that safe space against you. Ghosts start attacking Henry if he doesn't stay on top of lighting candles to ward off malevolent spirits. "I honestly thought I had completely cleared the apartment with those candles," says **Jason Eaves**. "I must have missed a bit! I was so annoyed." Yes, nothing more 'annoying' than being slaughtered by a ghost.

▷ Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

INFO

PUB Konami
DEV Team Silent
RELEASED ON PS2
RELEASE 2004
IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
The peerless first-person frights of PT owe a huge debt to The Room.

Too much fiddly combat and a truly *dreadful* escort quest stops it reaching the same peaks as Silent Hill 2. But it's still a terrific last gasp from a legendary dev team and often *terrifying*. Even if some readers don't understand why Henry was trapped at all. "At the end of the day it's just a wooden door," points out **Burak Renton**. Oh yeah! Boy, bet Henry feels silly now...

BYTE-SIZE BITS

Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

2020

The year Konami rereleased it on PC, in the middle of lockdown. Er, 'interesting' timing.

555-3750

Phone number on a billboard outside Henry's apartment. We don't recommend calling it.

04

Different endings to discover, appropriately enough. Only one of them 'good', naturally.

DEFENDING

Roman Bellic

James Nouch thinks it's time you called your cousin and told him how much you care

We've all known somebody who's a little over-eager. The kind of person who will keep calling you even when you don't call them back. Someone who might, for example, be unable to detect any subtext whatsoever when you say "I can't go bowling tonight. I've developed an allergy to the special polish they use to make the balls so shiny." It's fair to say that Roman Bellic, the cousin of Grand Theft Auto IV protagonist Niko Bellic, is such a person.

But hold on there, partner – climb down from that high horse. Haven't you heard that we're in the grip of a loneliness epidemic? In a world in which 8% of Americans say they have no close friends, and 6% of Brits told a government survey they feel lonely often or always, maybe it's time to stop saying "no" and start saying "I bought us these custom-embroidered bowling jackets because I love you."

After all, let's run through some of Roman's personality traits. Sure, he may be a keen bean, and he's prone to exaggeration when discussing the cars he drives, his levels of gambling debt, or the number of hot tubs he owns. But Roman is devoted to Niko, determined that you'll get to experience the American dream together.

And you know what: bowling is *fun*. You put on some snazzy shoes, pick up a heavy, shiny ball, and throw it at stuff. What's not to love? And as if that isn't its own reward, your efforts are accompanied by the sound of tumbling pins and flashy animations played on your own special little scoring TV. It's an embarrassment of sensory riches.

So the next time you're tempted to roll your eyes at one of Roman's invitations, remember that this is a loyal friend. Remember how hard he's worked. And remember that you'll unlock a trophy if you hit three strikes in a row. And just say yes.

"NIKO, IT'S ROMAN. LET'S GO BOWLING!"

Roman, I was wrong to ever refuse you anything. I'm lacing up my alley shoes as we speak.

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Grand Theft Auto IV

STATS
Roman's ultimate fate in GTA IV hinges on whether or not you seek revenge on Dimitri Rascalov. (Hint: do it.)

It's possible to peep at Niko's LifeInvader profile in GTA V, and he's posted Roman a happy birthday message. Aww.

Tom Clancy's The Division features a touching tribute to Roman in the form of a bowling ball inscribed with the word 'cousin'.

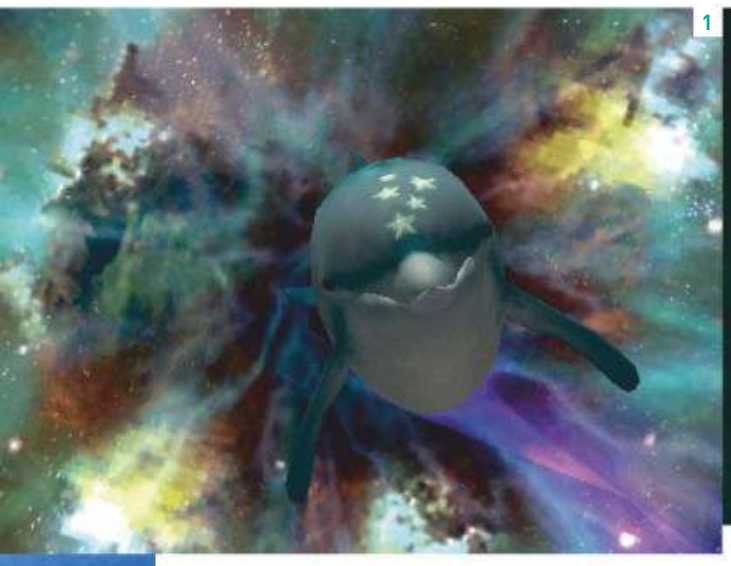
SPIN-OFFS
The Lost And Damned, The Ballad Of Gay Tony

HOW TO PLAY?
Dust off your PS3 and grab GTA IV for a fiver on eBay.

CLASSIC GAME

Ecco The Dolphin: Defender Of The Future

School's out of this world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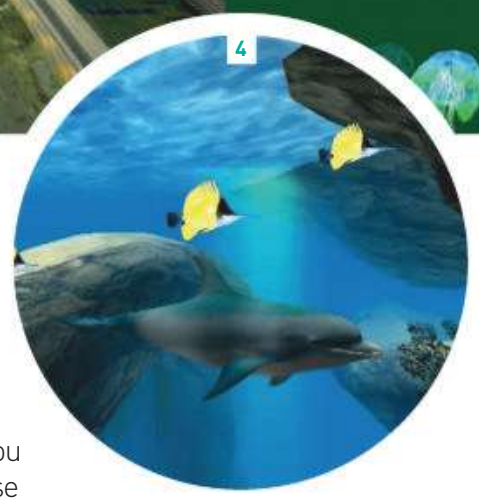
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1 We have to go back, Ecco! Back to the future! 2 Fashion conscious Ecco can control machines when he's wearing this outfit. 3 Who knows what's lurking in the dark, waiting to grab you as you struggle to resurface for air. 4 Fish are friends *and* food. 5 Who lives in a house like this?

You're in the belly of the beast, trapped in a Giger-esque alien hatchery. Toe-curling crackling sounds and murmurs emphasise the unsettling atmosphere. Ecco's oxygen is low, but you've become discombobulated and can't find a source to replenish it. Suddenly, Echo emits the most devastating, gut-wrenching cry in gaming history as he dies slowly, gasping for air.

If you've ever looked at Ecco The Dolphin: Defender Of The Future in passing and thought, 'That looks like a light-hearted, stress-free experience', then that agonising death may come as a surprise. It's stressful in the extreme, while being a masterstroke in building atmosphere and environmental design. Previously released on Dreamcast and following on from its tough as nails Mega Drive heritage, this game plops Ecco into a 3D environment for the first (and last) time.

Despite Ecco's gleeful grin, this is a sci-fi adventure that sees you traversing alternate, dystopian realities and fighting a grotesque alien race. In Ecco's world, humans made the sensible decision to team up with dolphins and form a peaceful society that expanded beyond Earth. The Foe – aka "aliens" – aren't fond of peace and love, and fancied a piece of Earth pie, but were defeated by dolphins and humans. This called for a course of revenge and time travel malarkey to take down their enemies once and for all – but Earth has its caretakers, including Ecco.

Four distinct environments frame the experience. Each is a world apart from the last, without giving you tonal whiplash; fear and uncertainty gradualy creep in. That is, until the walls close in to an almost unbearable degree. At first, it's like stepping into an aquarium, as the soothing music and sounds of the ocean form a relaxing soundscape. You learn how to be a dolphin – how to use sonar, charge, befriend fish, and tailwalk above the water. Wildly obtuse hint crystals speak in riddles, so you can spend hours not having a clue what's happening and playing 'happy little dolphin simulator 2002', none the wiser to the horrors that await beyond the reef.

AT SEA LEVEL

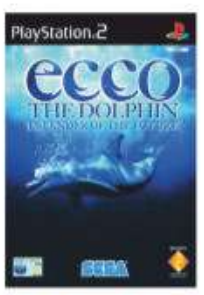
You may be a dolphin, but Ecco throws the ocean rulebook away, and the game features some of the most memorable levels of the era. Man's Nightmare (the 'human's have screwed it up again' timeline) is a suffocating, mechanical world. In contrast, the future dominated by empirically inclined dolphins utilises organic technology, allowing them to bend the world to their will – so much so, that currents can be found in the sky. These 'Hanging Gardens' are spectacular, toying with gravity and scale in their platforming. The rippling translucence of the water around you creates the uncanny feeling of being inside a bubble.

Ecco is known for its punishing difficulty and devilish Tomb Raider-style puzzles, but it also leans heavily into elements more common to survival horror. Maintaining Ecco's oxygen levels while diving deeper into the abyss sets the heart racing. But it doesn't end there. Resources are increasingly limited, triggering several major phobias: fear of drowning, claustrophobia, and vertigo to name a few. The final area, Domain Of The Enemy, becomes organic horror, utilising every horrendous trick in HR Giger's book.

Increasing the tension is a smart use of draw distance, with underwater visibility a good excuse for limited draw distance in the PS2 era. That's aged better than you might think, allowing for a surprising level of detail while maintaining a sense of unease. Getting jumpscared by a jellyfish in murkier waters or stumbling across an ancient ruin isn't a jarring pop-in effect, but an effective way of immersing you in the unpredictable, living environment.

While other sub-aquatic games have come along since, they tend to lean on a particular gimmick, rather than being a functional Frankenstein's monster like Ecco. If you mashed Abzû and Maneater together, the sum of its parts would be reminiscent of this singular experience – its influence is palpable in both. In the end, its tangibly buoyant dolphin, level design, and captivating sci-fi backdrop elevates it to the oceanic hall of fame. ■

> **"Ecco is stressful in the extreme, while being a masterstroke in building atmosphere and environmental design."**



INFO

PUB Sega

DEV Appaloosa Interactive

RELEASED 2002

GET IT NOW £5-20 CEX, eBay

NEED TO KNOW

1 Former Doctor Who, Tom Baker, narrates cutscenes to facilitate all your timey-wimey needs.

2 The storyline writer is science fiction author and NASA consultant David Brin.

3 Ecco's got serious range, with over 100 fin-tastic dolphin animations.

5

PLUS POINTS

Daxter

Time to fill out that Dax return

1 The graphics hold up well, but the environments tend to be dull. 2 There's a sort-of open world hub, but nothing to do in it. 3 Bug Combat is a Pokémon-lite extra that is here limited to solo play.

Did you ever wonder what furry longboi Daxter got up to while Jak was locked up in prison between Jak And Daxter: The Precursor Legacy and Jak II? No, us neither, but here we are. This enjoyed rave reviews on release but, to be honest, upon playing it we're struggling to understand why. His life was pretty dull while he was waiting to adventure with Jak again.

For almost the entire game, we follow Daxter during his stint as an exterminator. We don't mean he's a hunter of legions of Helldiver-style bugs, in possession of a satisfying armoury of heavy weapons. We mean that one of the first things he does is clear out big-but-not-huge bugs from a hotel using what is in effect a fly swatter, a weapon that you shouldn't expect to abandon any time soon.

The premise is dull, and while there's an attempt to spice things up with a bit of variety – plenty of platforming, some piloting of vehicles, a small number of new gadgets and upgrades to acquire, and even some dull movie-spoof minigames delivered via dream sequences[1] – this was far from revolutionary even in 2006.

NO JAK CITY

Daxter's introduction to PS Plus does at least indicate Sony might be starting to put more effort into PSP emulation. The graphics are cleaner than usual for PSP games on the service, and there's even an option to use the right stick for camera control! (It might seem like a small thing to some, but this addition makes the experience so much smoother for today's audience.)

INFO

PUB Sony
DEV Ready At Dawn
RELEASED 2006

Some things in the game that need modernising would require a full remake – the introduction of the character Taryn is one thing that springs to mind. She first appears via a closeup of her (at least clothed) chest when Daxter almost flies into it,[2] which the camera leers over for a few uncomfortable seconds before pulling back to show the rest of her. The whole thing of Daxter half-flirting with her while calling her "toots" throughout the game is a bit weird, to be honest. Have fond memories of this? Never meet your heroes.

FOOTNOTES 1 QTEs are not only here, but feature in some quite frankly stressful sequences in the main game too. **2** "That ain't no bug!" Daxter shouts at her boobs.

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"ONE OF MY FAVOURITE GAMES IN MY YOUTH."
Byron Squibb

"THOSE DREAM MINIGAMES THAT WERE LIKE MOVIE EASTER EGGS WERE SO MUCH FUN."
Alex Spillman

"RIP READY AT DAWN."
Jorge C. Alves

▷ Small packages? **Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters** arrives on PS Plus

A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Sports

The industry hasn't dropped the ball yet

In Japan, the Cool Boarders series had a PS2 entry called Cool Boarders: Code Alien. There were no actual aliens.

Blitzball is a sport seen in Final Fantasy X and X-2. A tabletop replica featured in a promotional art exhibition.

BMX XXX was a terrible 2002 BMX game on PS2, with 'wacky' humour and unlockable videos of female strippers.

There was an NBA game for PSP just called NBA. Overwatch's Summer Games event includes the minigame Lucioball. **Tony Hawk's first game was Tony Hawk's Pro Skater on PS1 (1999).** The first PlayStation FIFA game was FIFA 97 (1996, confusingly).

LEAGUES AHEAD

We car a lot

2015's Rocket League is a spiritual successor to Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars, taking that game and refining it. It had a big year in 2019, when Sony allowed crossplay on PlayStation (having first done so the previous year for Fortnite), and developer Psyonix was bought by Epic Games. Then in 2020, it went (and remains) free to play.

THE WORLD FIRST SAW CARS KNOCKING A FOOTBALL AROUND IN 2008, VIA **SUPERSONIC ACROBATIC ROCKET-POWERED BATTLE-CARS** ON PS3.

EA's first officially-licensed Formula 1 game was F1 2000 on PS1.

Everybody's Golf made its way to PlayStation Vita in 2012.

Champion Jockey: G1 Jockey & Gallop Racer (2011, PS3) allowed use of either PlayStation Move or the more traditional DualShock 3.

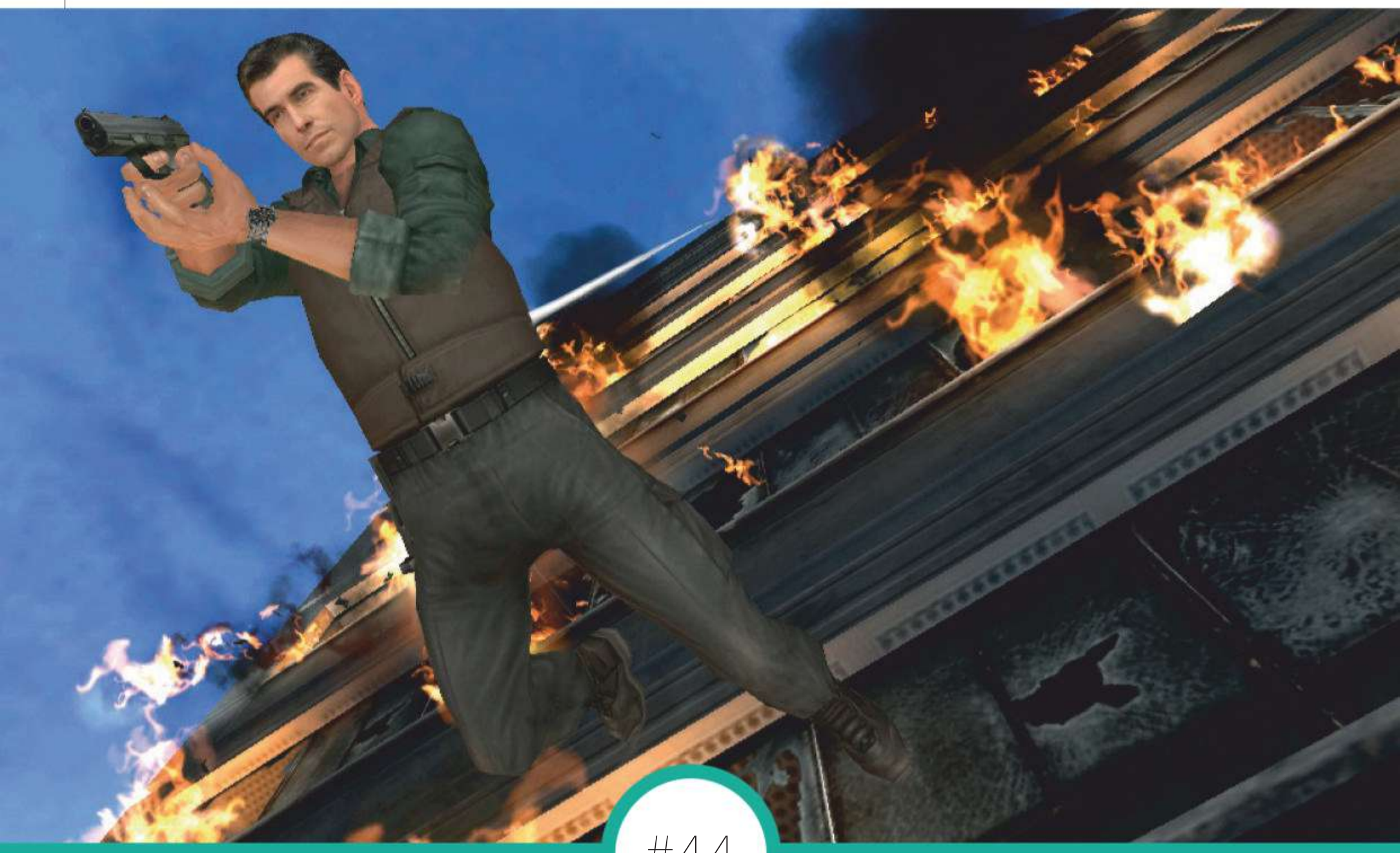
The PAL version of RedCard, a football game that encouraged fouls, had footie bad boy Vinnie Jones (better known for his acting nowadays) on the cover.

BOWLED OVER

What a bloody palaver

Cyanide Studios has been making Blood Bowl games since 2009. In 2004, it released Chaos League, a game so similar to the concept of Blood Bowl that Games Workshop sued. The lawsuit was settled out of court, and, surprisingly, the terms of the settlement included granting Cyanide the right to make official Blood Bowl videogames.

▷ Next issue: we're all in for the history of PlayStation **card games**!



#44

View to a thrill

James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing thrusts you into Bond's world, and proves that nobody does it better

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** EA / **DEV** EA REDWOOD SHORES / **RELEASED** 2004

The iconography of James Bond is so ingrained in pop culture that there are things you assume will feature in any Bond story: gadgets, guns, supercars, and Bond girls, to name a few. Everything Or Nothing takes its title literally, going all-in and leaving you with little breathing room between action sequences.

To ensure you're aware that this is *definitely* James Bond, the first post-tutorial mission, A Long Way Down, pulls out all the stops and never pushes them back in. Bond has infiltrated a weapon research facility in Egypt; it's developing nanotechnology and he needs to destroy it. He pulls out an explosive that looks like an oversized Tamagotchi and puts in the super-secret passcode: 007. (Bond may be the world's greatest secret agent, but don't ask him to come up with an unbreakable password.) As it detonates, he leaps off of the skyscraper and abseils down in an explosive start to the mission.

During the descent, bad guys shout imaginative threats like 'Die!' and meet their demise by screaming or firing one last gunshot in the opposite direction. Bond Moments – optional goals that require you to Be Even More Bond – pop for making enemies sweat like buns in a steamer, while he quips as if he's on a Friday night jaunt in London. Everything Or Nothing is full of Bond home comforts and this snapshot captures the exuberance of Pierce-Brosnan-era Bond; it's over the top, you're gloriously overpowered, and it sets the bar for fun, fast-paced action that only escalates from here.

TIME TO PLAY? A Long Way Down propels you into the action at the start of the game, immediately after the intro and Q's training mission. This leads into an exhilarating train chase, a fight with classic villain Jaws, and blasting through Egyptian monuments in a chopper. Phew!

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 17 SEPTEMBER

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

The vast Windward Plains and its creatures beckon

PLAY

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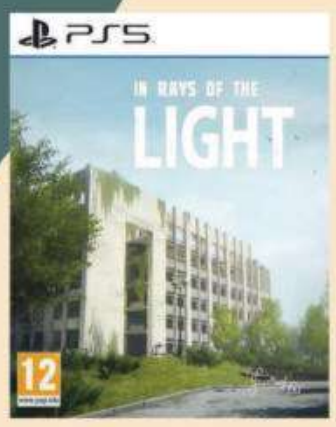

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